

SUMMER
1994

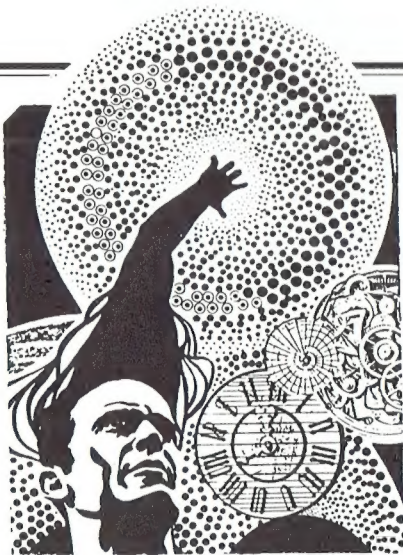
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ON THIS ISSUE

by Jena Snyder, Production Editor

WELCOME TO ALL OUR NEW SUBSCRIBERS! — Our recent subscription campaign was a huge success, and we're really pleased to welcome so many new readers. We promise you'll see galaxies of great fiction, poetry, artwork and nonfiction in this issue and in those to come.

KEEP WATCHING THESE PAGES — for a story by the inimitable punmeister SPIDER ROBINSON ... beautiful and haunting poetry by ALICE MAJOR ... more poetic speculation from JOCKO ... art by all your favourite ON SPEC artists ... and much, much more!

AURORA NOMINATIONS — To say we were delighted when we saw the list of nominees for this year's Auroras would be a minor understatement. Not only was ON SPEC nominated for Best Other Work in English: "Ask Mr. Science" appears on our pages, as did EILEEN KERNAGHAN's poem, "Circle Dance" (Spring 93). Four out of the five nominations for Best Short-Form Work in English were in ON SPEC: DERRYL MURPHY's "Body Solar" (Winter 93); ROBERT J. SAWYER's "Just Like Old Times" (Summer 93); DIRK L. SCHAEFFER's "Three Moral Tales" (Spring 93); and ERIK JON SPIGEL's "Kissing Hitler" (Spring 93). In our Winter 92 issue we published an excerpt from SEAN STEWART's novel, *Nobody's Son*, nominated for Best Long-Form Work in English. As for the nominations for Artistic Achievement, what can we say? LYNNE TAYLOR FAHNESTALK is our current Art Director; TIM HAMMELL is our past Art Director; we've featured no less than three covers by ROBERT PASTERNAK (most recently Winter 93); KENNETH SCOTT painted our incredible and disturbing *Over the Edge* cover (Spring 93); and our current cover is by JEAN-PIERRE NORMAND. We haven't forgotten MIKE JACKSON: he's working on the cover for an upcoming issue! See page 45 to find out how YOU can vote for your favourites. Congratulations and good luck to all the nominees!

FRENCH/ENGLISH STORY EXCHANGE — This issue features the first in what we hope is a long and fruitful exchange of French and English Canadian SF: HAROLD CÔTÉ's "The Project," DESCRIBED by Jöel Champetier, editor of *Solaris*, as "A clever time-travel story, a *tour-de-force* in self-reference and circularity." "Le projet," originally published in *Solaris* #101, was translated by Marlene Hanson. Please look for the French translation of ERIK JON SPIGEL's "Kissing Hitler" ("*Un baiser pour Hitler*"), translated by Élisabeth Vonarburg, in the Summer 94 issue of *Solaris*.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS — *ON SPEC* staff will be at Cancon in Ottawa in May, ConVersion in Calgary in July, and of course, Worldcon, if any of you would like to talk to us in person. If you enjoy our magazine and would like to help, we are now collecting volunteers for Worldcon. If you have an

hour to spare to sit at our booth, or keep the coffee going in the publisher's suite, please drop us a line.

MORE CONGRATULATIONS — for ROBERT J. SAWYER, whose story "Just Like Old Times," first published in *ON SPEC*, has been nominated for an Arthur Ellis award.

THANKS!

We couldn't have done it without you!

A million and more thank yous to all the tireless volunteers who stuffed 15,000 envelopes for our subscription blitz:

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ON SPEC DEADLINES

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(Theme: *Horror & Dark
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Submissions must be in COMPETITION FORMAT: no author name on manuscript. Enclose self-addressed, stamped envelope with sufficient postage to cover return of manuscript (or mark "Disposable" and include SASE for reply only), and covering letter with name, address, phone number, story title and word count. More details, page 95.

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NIMBUS

by Peter Watts

illustrated by Mitchell Stuart

She's been out there for hours now, listening to the clouds. I can see the Radio Shack receiver balanced on her knees, I can see the headphone wires snaking up and cutting her off from the world. Or connecting her, I suppose. Jess is hooked into the sky now, in a way I'll never be. She can hear it talking. The clouds advance, threatening grey anvils and mountains boiling in ominous slow motion, and the 'phones fill her head with alien grumbles and moans.

God, she looks like her mother. I catch her profile and for a moment it is Anne there, gently chiding, *of course not, Jess, there aren't any spirits. They're just clouds.* But now I see her face and eight years have passed in a flash, and I know this can't be Anne. Anne knew how to smile.

I should go out and join her. It's still safe enough, we've got a good half hour before the storm hits. Not that it's really going to hit *us*; it's just passing through, they say, on its way to some other target. Still, I wonder if it knows we're in the way. I wonder if it cares.

I *will* join her. For once, I will not be a coward. My daughter sits five meters away in our own back yard, and I am damn well going to be there for her. It's the least I can do before I go.

I wonder if it will mean anything to her.

•

An aftermath, before the enlightenment.

It was as though somebody had turned the city upside down and shaken it. We waded through a shallow sea of detritus; broken walls, slabs of torn roofing, toilets and sofas and shattered glass. I walked behind Anne, Jess bouncing on my shoulders making happy gurgling noises; just over a year old, not quite talking yet but plenty old enough for continual astonishment. You could see it in her eyes. Every blown newspaper, every bird, every step was a new experi-

ence in wonder.

Also every loaded shotgun. Every trigger-happy national guardsman. This was a time when people still thought they owned things. They saw their homes strewn across two city blocks and the enemy they feared was not the weather, but each other. Hurricanes were accidents, freaks of nature. The experts were still blaming volcanoes and the greenhouse effect for everything. Looters, on the other hand, were real. They were tangible. They were a problem with an obvious solution.

The volunteers' shelter squatted in the distance like a circus tent at Armageddon. A tired-looking woman inside had given us shovels and pitchforks, and directed us to the nearest pile of unmanned debris. We began to pitch pieces of someone's life into an enormous blue dumpster. Anne and I worked side by side, stopping occasionally to pass Jessica back and forth.

I wondered what new treasures I was about to unearth. Some priceless family heirloom, miraculously spared? A complete collection of Jethro Tull CDs? Just a game, of course; the whole area had been combed, the owners had come and despaired of salvage, there was only wreckage beneath the wreckage. Still, every now and then I thought I saw something shining in the dirt, a bottle cap or a gum wrapper or a Rolex—

My pitchfork punched through a chunk of plaster and slid into something soft. It dropped suddenly under my weight, as if lubricated. It stopped.

I heard the muted hiss of escaping gas. Something smelled, very faintly, of rotten meat.

This isn't what I think it is. The crews have already been here. They used trained dogs and infrared scopes and they've already found all the bodies, they couldn't have missed anything there's nothing here but wood and plaster and cement—

I tightened my grip on the pitchfork, pulled up on the shaft. The tines rose up from the plaster, slick, dark, wet.

Anne was laughing. I couldn't believe it. I looked up, but she wasn't looking at me or the pitchfork or the coagulating stain. She was looking across the wreckage to a Ford pickup, loaded with locals and their rifles, inching its way down a pathway cleared in the road.

"Get a load of the bumper," she said, oblivious to my discovery.

There was a bumper sticker on the driver's side. I saw the caricature of a storm cloud, inside the classic red circle with diagonal slash. And a slogan.

A warning, to whom it may concern: *Clouds, we're gonna kick your ass.*

•

Jess takes off the headphones as I join her. She touches a button on the receiver. Cryptic wails, oddly familiar, rise from a speaker on the front of the device. We sit for a moment without speaking, letting the sounds wash over us.

Everything about her is so pale. I can barely see her eyebrows.

"Do they know where it's headed?" Jess asks at last.

I shake my head. "There's Hanford, but they've never gone after a reactor before. They say it might be trying to get up enough steam to go

over the mountains. Maybe it's going after Vancouver or Sea-Tac again." I tap the box on her knees. "Hey, it might be laying plans even as we speak. You've been listening to that thing long enough, you should know what it's saying by now."

A distant flicker of sheet lightning strobes on the horizon. From Jessica's receiver, a dozen voices wail a discordant crescendo.

"Or you could even talk to it," I continue. "I saw the other day, they've got two-ways now. Like yours, only you can send as well as receive."

Jess fingers the volume control. "It's just a gimmick, Dad. These things couldn't put out enough power to get heard over all the other stuff in the air. TV, and radio, and..." She cocks her head at the sounds coming from the speaker. "Besides, nobody understands what they're saying anyway."

"Ah, but *they* could understand us," I say, trying for a touch of mock drama.

"Think so?" Her voice is expressionless, indifferent.

I push on anyway. Talking at least helps paper over my fear a bit. "Sure. The big ones could understand, anyway. A storm this size must have an IQ in the six digits, easy."

"I suppose," Jess says.

Inside, something tears a little. "Doesn't it *matter* to you?"

She just looks at me.

"Don't you want to know?" I say. "We're sitting here underneath this huge thing that nobody understands, we don't know what it's doing or why, and you sit there listening while it shouts at itself and you don't seem to care that it changed everything

overnight—"

But of course, she doesn't remember that. Her memory doesn't go back to when we thought that clouds were just...clouds. She never knew what it was like to rule the world, and she never expects to.

My daughter is indifferent to defeat.

Suddenly, unbearably, I just want to hold her. *God, Jess, I'm sorry we messed up so badly.* With effort, I control myself. "I just wish you could remember the way it was."

"Why?" she asks. "What was so different?"

I look at her, astonished. "Everything!"

"It doesn't sound like it. They say we *never* understood the weather. There were hurricanes and tornadoes even before, and sometimes they'd smash whole cities, and nobody could stop them then either. So what if it happens because the sky's alive, or just because it's, you know, random?"

Because your mother is dead, Jess, and after all these years I still don't know what killed her. Was it just blind chance? Was it the reflex of some slow, stupid animal that was only scratching an itch?

Can the sky commit murder?

"It matters," is all I tell her. Even if it doesn't make a difference.

The front is almost directly overhead now, like the mouth of a great black cave crawling across the heavens. West, all is clear. Above, the squall line tears the sky into jagged halves.

East, the world is a dark, murky green.

I feel so vulnerable out here. I

glance back over my shoulder. The armoured house crouches at our backs, only the biggest trees left to keep it company. It's been eight years and the storms still haven't managed to dig us out. They got Mexico City, and Berlin, and the whole damn golden horseshoe, but our little house hangs in there like a festering cyst embedded in the landscape.

Then again, they probably just haven't noticed us yet.

•

Reprieved. The thing in the sky had gone to sleep, at least in our corner of the world. The source of its awareness—sources, rather, for they were legion—had convected into the stratosphere and frozen, a billion crystalline motes of suspended intellect. By the time they came back down they'd be on the other side of the world, and it would take days for the rest of the collective conscious to fill the gap.

We used the time to ready our defences. I was inspecting the exoskeleton the contractors had just grafted onto the house. Anne was around front, checking the storm shutters. Our home had become monstrous, an angular fortress studded with steel beams and lightning rods. A few years earlier we would have sued anyone who did this to us. Today, we had gone into hock to pay for the retrofit.

I looked up at a faint roar from overhead. The sun reflected off a cluster of tiny cruciform shapes drawing contrails across the sky.

Cloud seeders. A common enough sight. In those days we still thought we could fight back.

"They won't work," Jess said se-

riously at my elbow.

I look down, startled. "Hey, Jess. Didn't see you sneaking up on me."

"They're just getting the clouds mad," she said, with all the certainty a four-year-old can muster. She squinted up into the blue expanse. "They're just trying to kill the, um, the messenger."

I squatted down, regarded her eye to eye. "And who told you that?" Not her mother, anyway.

"That woman. Talking to Mom."

Not just a woman, I saw as I rounded the corner into the front yard. A couple: early twenties, mildly scruffy, both bearing slogans on their T-shirts. *Love Your Mother* the woman's chest told me, over a decal of the earth from lunar orbit. The man's shirt was more verbose: *Unlimited growth, the creed of carcinoma*. No room for a picture on that one.

Gaianists. Retreating across the lawn, facing Anne, as if afraid to turn their backs. Anne was smiling and waving, the very picture of inoffence, but I really felt for the poor bastards. They probably never knew what hit them.

Sometimes, when Seventh-Day Adventists came calling, Anne would actually invite them in for a little target practise. It was usually the Adventists who asked to leave.

"Did they have anything worthwhile to say?" I asked her now.

"Not really." Anne stopped waving and turned to face me. Her smile morphed into a triumphant smirk. "We're angering the sky gods, you know that? Thou shalt not inhabit a single-family dwelling. Thou shalt honour thy environmental impact, to keep it low."

"They could be right," I remarked. At least, there weren't many people around to argue the point. Most of our former neighbours had already retreated into hives. Not that *their* environmental impact had had much to do with it.

"Well, I'll grant it's not as flaky as some of the things they come up with," Anne admitted. "But if they're going to blame me for the revenge of the cloud demons, they damn well better have a rational argument or two waiting in the wings."

"I take it they didn't."

She snorted. "The same hokey metaphors. Gaia's leaping into action to fight the human disease. I guess hurricanes are supposed to be some sort of penicillin."

"No crazier than some of the things the experts say."

"Yeah, well, I don't necessarily believe them either."

"Maybe you should," I said. "I mean, we sure as hell don't know what's going on."

"And you think *they* do? Just a couple of years ago they were denying everything, remember? *Life can't exist without stable organized structure*, they said."

"I sort of thought they'd learned a few things since then."

"No kidding." Anne's eyes grew round with enlightenment. "And all this time I thought they were just making up trendy buzzwords."

Jess wandered between us. Anne scooped her up; Jess scrambled onto her mother's shoulders and surveyed the world from dizzying adult height.

I glanced back at the retreating evangelists. "So how did you handle those two?"

"I agreed with them," Anne said. "Agreed?"

"Sure. We're a disease. Fine. Only some of us have mutated." She jerked a thumb at our castle. "Now, we're resistant to antibiotics."

■

We are resistant to antibiotics. We've encysted ourselves like hermit crabs. We've been pruned, cut back, decimated but not destroyed. We are only in remission.

But now, outside the battlements, we are naked. Even at this range the storm could reach out and swat us both in an instant. How can Jess just sit there?

"I can't even enjoy sunny days any more," I admit to her.

She looks at me, and I know her perplexity is not because I can't enjoy clear skies, but because I would even think it worthy of comment. I keep talking, refusing the chronic realization that we are aliens to each other. "The sky can be pure blue and sunshine, but if there's even one fluffy little cumulus bumping along I can't help feeling...watched. It doesn't matter if it's too small to think on its own, or that it'll dissipate before it gets a chance to upload. I keep thinking it's some sort of spy, it's going to report back somewhere."

"I don't think they can see," Jess says absently. "They just sense big things like cities and smokestacks, hot spots or things that...itch. That's all."

The wind breathes, deceptively gentle, in her hair. Above us a finger of grey vapour crawls between two towering masses of cumulo-nimbus. What's happening up there? A random conjunction of water droplets? A 25,000-baud data dump between

processing nodes? Even after all this time it sounds absurd.

So many eloquent theories, so many explanations for our downfall. Everyone's talking about order from chaos: fluid geometry, bioelectric microbes that live in the clouds, complex behaviours emerging from some insane alliance of mist and electrochemistry. It looks scientific enough on paper, but spoken aloud it always sounds like an incantation...

And none of it helps. The near distance is lit with intermittent flashes of light. The storm is walking toward us on jagged fractal legs. I feel like an insect under the heel of a descending boot. Maybe that's a positive sign. Would I be afraid if I had really given up?

Maybe. Maybe the situation is irrelevant. Maybe cowards are *always* afraid.

Jess's receiver is crying incessantly. "Whale songs," I hear myself say, and the tremor in my voice is barely discernible. "Humpback whales. That's what they sound like."

Jess fixes her eyes back on the sky. "They don't *sound* like anything, Dad. It's just electricity. Only the receiver sort of...makes it sound like something we know."

Another gimmick. We've fallen from God's chosen to endangered species in only a decade, and the hustlers still won't look up from their market profiles. I can sympathize. Looming above us, right now, are the ones who threw us into the street. The forward overhang is almost upon us. Ten kilometers overhead, winds are screaming past each other at sixty meters a second.

So far the storm isn't even breath-

ing hard.

•

There was a banshee raging through the foothills. It writhed with tornadoes; Anne and I had watched the whirling black tentacles tearing at the horizon before we'd fled underground. Tornadoes were impossible during the winter, we had been assured just a year before. Yet here we were, huddling together as the world shook, and all our reinforcements might as well have been made of paper if one of those figments came calling.

Sex is instinctive at times like those. Jeopardy reduces us to automata; there is no room for love when the genes reassert themselves. Even pleasure is irrelevant. We were just another pair of mammals trying to maximize our fitness before the other shoe dropped.

Afterwards, at least, we were still allowed to feel. We clung together, blind and invisible in the darkness, almost crushing each other with the weight of our own desperation. We couldn't stop crying. I gave silent thanks that Jess had been trapped at the daycare when the front came through. I wouldn't have stood the strain of a brave facade that night.

After a while, Anne stopped shaking. She lay in my arms, sniffling quietly. Dim floaters of virtual light swarmed maddeningly at the edge of my vision.

"The gods have come back," she said at last.

"Gods?" Anne was usually so bloody empirical.

"The old ones," she said. "The Old Testament gods. The Greek pantheon. Thunderbolts and fire and

brimstone. We thought we'd outgrown them, you know? We thought..."

I felt a deep, trembling breath.

"I thought," she continued. "I thought we didn't need them any more. But we did. We fucked up so horribly on our own. There was nobody to keep us in line, and we trampled everything..."

I stroked her back. "Old news, Annie. You know we've cleaned things up. Hardly any cities allow gasoline any more, extinctions have levelled off. I even heard the other day that rainforest biomass increased last year."

"That's exactly what I mean." A sigh whispered across my cheek. "That's not *us*. We're no better than we ever were. We're just afraid of a spanking. Like spoiled kids caught drawing naughty pictures on the walls."

"Anne, we still don't know for sure if the clouds are really alive. Even if they are, that doesn't make them intelligent. Some people still say this is all just a weird side-effect of chemicals in the atmosphere."

"We're begging for mercy, Jon. That's all we're doing."

We breathed against dark, distant roaring for a few moments.

"At least we're doing something." I said at last. "Maybe we're not doing it for all the enlightened reasons we should be, but at least we're cleaning up. That's something."

"Not enough," she said. "We threw shit at something for centuries. How can a few prayers and sacrifices make it just go away and leave us alone? If it even exists. And if it *does* have any more brains than a

flatworm. I guess you get the gods you deserve."

I tried to think of something to say, some twig of false reassurance. But, as usual, I wasn't fast enough. Anne picked herself up first:

"At least we've learned a little humility. And who knows? Maybe the gods will answer our prayers before Jess grows up..."

•

They didn't. The experts tell us now that our supplications are on indefinite hold. We're praying to something that shrouds the whole planet, after all. It takes time for such a huge system to assimilate new information, more time to react. The clouds don't live by human clocks. We swarm like bacteria to them, doubling our numbers in an instant. How fast the response, from our microbial perspective? How long before the knee jerks? The experts mumble jargon among themselves and guess: decades. Maybe fifty years. This monster advancing on us now is answering a summons from the last century.

The sky screams down to fight with ghosts. It doesn't see me. If it sees anything at all, it is only the afterimage of some insulting sore, decades old, that needs to be disinfected. I lean against the wind. Murky chaos sweeps across something I used to call property. The house recedes behind me. I don't dare look but I know it must be kilometers away, and somehow I'm paralysed. This blind seething medusa claws its way towards me and its face covers the whole sky; how can I not look?

"Jessica..."

I can see her from the corner of my eye. With enormous effort, I move

my head a little and she comes into focus. She is looking at the heavens, but her expression is not terrified or awed or even curious.

Slowly, smooth as an oiled machine, she lowers her eyes to earth and switches off the receiver. It hardly matters any more. The thunder is continuous, the wind is an incessant roar, the first hailstones are pelting down on us. If we stay out here we'll be dead in two hours. Doesn't she know it? Is this some sort of test, am I supposed to prove my love for her by facing down God like this?

Maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe now's the time. Maybe—

Jessica puts her hand on my knee. "Come on," she says, like a parent. "Let's go inside."

•

I am remembering the last time I saw Anne. I have no choice; the moment traps me when I'm not looking, embeds me in a cross-section of time stopped dead when the lightning hit ten meters behind her:

The world is a flat mosaic in blinding black-and white, strobe-lit, motionless. Sheets of grey water are suspended in the act of slamming the earth. Anne is just out of reach, head down, her determination as clear as a kodalith snapshot in perfect focus: she is damn well going to make it to safety and she doesn't care what gets in her way. And then the lightning implodes into darkness, the world jerks back into motion with a sound like Hiroshima and the stench of burning electricity, but my eyes are shut tight, still fixed on that receding instant. There is sudden pain, small fingernails gouging the flesh of my palm, and I know that Jessica has not closed her eyes, that she knows more of this

moment than I can bear to. I pray, for the only time in my life I pray to the sky *please let me be mistaken take someone else take me take the whole fucking city only please give her back I'm sorry I didn't believe...*

Forty or fifty years from now, according to some, it might hear that. Too late for Anne. Too late even for me.

•

It's still out there. Just passing through, it drums its fingers on the ground and all our reinforced talismans can barely keep it out. Even here, in this underground sanctum, the walls are shaking.

It doesn't scare me any more.

There was another time, long ago, when I wasn't afraid. Back then the shapes in the sky were friendly; snow-covered mountains, magical kingdoms, once I even saw Anne up there. But now I only see something malign and hideous, ancient, something slow to anger and impossible to appease. In the thousands of years we spent watching the clouds, after all the visions and portents we read there, never once did we see the thing that was really looking back.

We see it now.

I wonder which epitaphs they'll be reading tomorrow. What city is about to be shattered by impossible tornadoes, how many will die in this fresh onslaught of hailstones and broken glass? I don't know. I don't even care. That surprises me. Just a few days ago, I think it would have mattered. Now, even the realization that we are spared barely moves me to indifference.

Jess, how can you sleep through this? The wind tries to uproot us, bits of God's brain bash themselves

against our shelter, and somehow you can just curl up in the corner and block it out. You're so much older than I am, Jess; you learned not to care years ago. Barely any of you shines out any more. Even the glimpses I catch only seem like old photographs, vague reminders of what you used to be. Do I really love you as much as I tell myself?

Maybe all I love is my own nostalgia.

I gave you a start, at least. I gave you a few soft years before things fell apart. But then the world split in two, and the part I can live in keeps shrinking. You slip so easily between both worlds; your whole generation is amphibious. Not mine. There's nothing left I can offer you, you don't need me at all. Before long I'd have

dragged you down with me.

I won't let that happen. You're half Anne, after all.

The maelstrom covers the sound of my final ascent. I wonder what Anne would think of me now. She'd disapprove, I guess. She was too much of a fighter to ever give up. I don't think she had a suicidal thought in her whole life.

And suddenly, climbing the stairs, I realize that I can ask her right now if I want to. Anne is watching me from a far dark corner of the room, through weathered adolescent eyes opened to mere slits. Is she going to call me back? Is she going to berate me for giving in, say that she loves me? I hesitate. I open my mouth.

But she closes her eyes without a word. •



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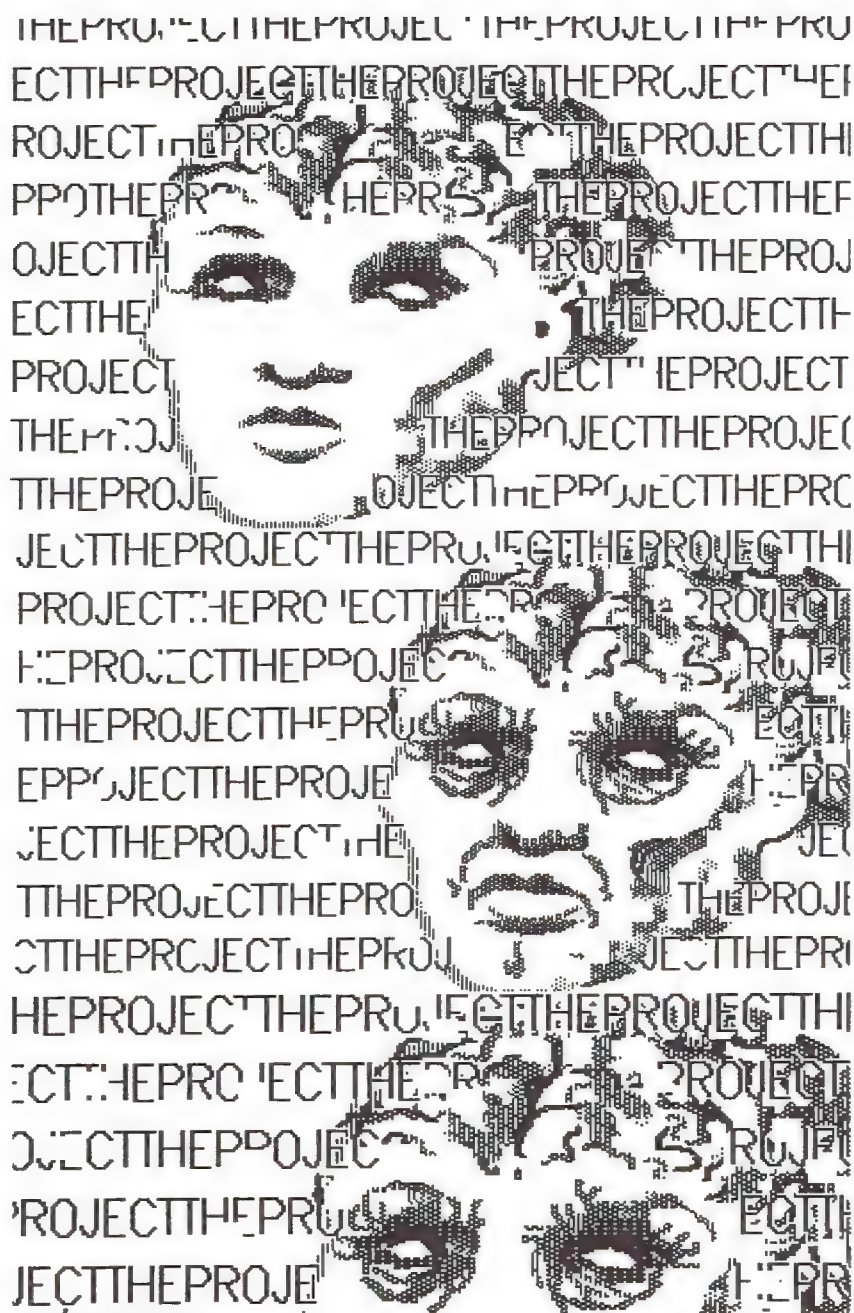
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THE PROJECT

by Harold Côté

translated by Marlene Hanson

illustrated by Tim Hammell

Originally published in Solaris 101, "The Project" is the first in a series of story exchanges between ON SPEC and French Canadian SF publishers.

IF *the stars could speak, man would not exist.*
- a boolian liar who is not without knowing himself.

I'm not sure any more when this idea came to mind. I don't even know now if it's really mine. Did I read it elsewhere, did I make it mine subconsciously, did I take it over from someone else? I have no idea. Writing a story raises a complex phenomenon whose origins are difficult to trace. Reading and conceiving a story are perhaps two facets of the same process.

How can you be certain that what you are writing has not already been written by someone else at another time, or even simply thought without having been written? In both cases, the result is the same: the idea was already there before it came to mind.

It is precisely this concept of a pre-existing idea which inspired my story. I called it *The Project*. Curiously, it is also the title of the story which you are presently reading; maybe it's the same story? One thing remains certain, my writing project is based on an idea which is not mine, a deliciously paradoxical idea, that of generating text at random, without intention, and which is proving to be quite intelligible.

Sit a monkey in front of a typewriter—in fact, it's an old idea and, today, the typewriter becomes a word processor—so you sit a monkey in front of a

word processor, and he begins to type letters on the keyboard, evidently without knowing what he is doing. He types, he types, he types, and on the screen springs up a text born at random and from his mood.

Most often, almost always, the text means nothing; it can't even be interpreted because it doesn't correspond to any known language. But if our monkey could type away into eternity, or if an infinite succession of generations of monkeys put themselves to the task, they would finish by writing something entirely sensible!

It's only a question of time: going through all of the possible combinations of a series of n letters and typographic characters will inevitably produce grammatical sequences in a known language; and among these grammatical sequences, some will have an interpretable meaning.

The *idea* is that in all of these lines are hidden brilliant ideas, ones that would transform the very nature of human life, statements that would explain the most unfathomable mysteries of the universe, sublime messages from the Gods or from extraterrestrial beings that we haven't yet met, valuable warnings about catastrophes to come...I could go on.

That is the idea; here is The Project: let's replace our generations of monkeys with 10 billion individuals all having access to a personal computer whose individual power goes beyond not only the capacity of today's most powerful computers but also beyond our own capacity to conceive of such computers.

Imagine that we are in the year 2067 and that the majority of humans—who now live in perfect harmony and possess enough leisure time to no longer know what to do—are continuously connected to a mega-network of these computers. We have available here 10 billion machines able to act as storywriters and 10 billion readers to interpret them.

Now think of an individual, someone like me who had the idea—who probably read it somewhere—or someone like you, who sees a way to use this network: build a data processing program that generates texts of a fixed length (arbitrarily a paragraph of at most 600 characters) in a specific language (it could be *Volapük* or *Esperanto*, something universal and understood by everyone, but for *our* story let's stick to English).

The program completed, one copy is distributed on the meganetwork and loaded into each of the 10 billion individual systems, where it runs on the unused cycles of the machine. (God and Minsky know that these supersystems, like the human brain, contain set cycles which are unused).

This program, thanks to stunning developments in generative transformational grammar, generates nothing but perfect grammatical texts and, thanks to the cognitive science and computational pragmatics (sophistically derived from the good old semantic analysis of underlying forms and discursive patterns) generates only *sensible* texts, that is to say, interpretable by common mortals (which is not necessarily the case in

this paragraph).

Let's forget the texts that begin with *colourless green ideas sleep furiously* or other similar apocrypha. The Project cannot do all, and these productions, poetic as they are, will simply be transmitted to the Central Memory Bank without being treated; a phase II of the Project can be tackled if Phase I doesn't amount to anything.

Already, you see a problem arising with *our idea*: will this program not end up generating the same texts for different systems? Chance being what it is, do we not stand to lose time reading millions of copies of the same insignificant paragraph? The Project has considered that, before you, or after, or at the same time: a unique variable will exist for each system so that the generations will begin by a sequence of different letters for each machine and will evolve thereafter from this unique sequence.

For example, for an abridged subset, a mini-Project by 26 machines, the first system would always begin its texts with the letter "a," the second with the letter "b," and so on.

If you use a set of 50 characters (about thirty letters, ten digits, and about ten typographic characters including the space bar), you can easily calculate that, to store a unique sequence on 10 billion systems, you only have to determine the first 6 characters of the paragraph (which actually gives us $50 \times 50 \times 50 \times 50 \times 50 \times 50 = 50^6$ possibilities, be it 1.6×10^{10} or more than 16 billion; which leaves space for demographic growth).

You can calculate just as readily that there exist 50^{600} or approximately 2.58×10^{1020} possible paragraphs. ENORMOUS! In fact, there is nothing in the universe to serve as a comparison, to give us an idea of what this number represents. But a Project paragraph may one day state:

Any number is only large in relative comparison to a given scale. The human mind's conception of any number is always possible by modifying the scale of comparison.

Obviously this paragraph is not 600 characters long and you doubt that it could be generated by the Project; but don't forget that a space is one of the possible typographic characters and that a paragraph ending with a long series of spaces is quite legitimate. Furthermore, a paragraph composed exclusively of spaces is one of the very first to have been generated! (That was a long time ago, before man used speech; a generation before the written word!).

Then let us consider our inconceivable 2.58×10^{1020} and attempt to reduce it a bit. With 10 billion systems working on the Project, or 10^{10} , by a simple division you can see that in order to generate all paragraphs possible, each system has only to produce 2.58×10^{1010} .

We must also consider the operating speed of these machines: at what speed can they create a paragraph? To generate a succession of 600 characters starting with a body of 50, and according to an algorithm as simplistic as alphabetical order, it must not be too demanding for these

marvellous supersystems.

It is calculated that in the year 2067, the Project will use systems which allow 1 billion paragraphs to be generated per second. This rate will increase from year to year as a result of technological advancements put forward by the Project itself.

With 10^{12} paragraphs per second and 3.15×10^7 seconds per year, each system will generate 3.15×10^{19} paragraphs per year (which represents approximately the circumference of a circle with a diameter of 5×10^{18} and tends to demonstrate that, with digits, you always end up going around in circles). Each one of our systems ought to generate 2.58×10^{1010} paragraphs; this will take about 8.2×10^{990} years. Has this simplified anything? Is this number any more conceivable than the first one? Not really, but as one day an eventual old paragraph of the Project will say:

Time will stretch and shrink according to its expression in seconds, in hours, in years, in millennia or in megayears. A "megayear" is a unit of time which corresponds to exactly 8.2×10^{990} years.

Therefore, after only 1 megayear, we will already have generated all paragraphs possible! But that is not the most important element; the end of the Project is only the end of one phase and the beginning of another. What's important is that at any time, an interesting, unexpected paragraph might appear.

"I have decided to join the ranks of the antipros!"

Brenda stared at length at her sister, whose silence only confirmed what she had feared: Gloria wasn't kidding. Not this time. They had discussed it often, over several months now, since St. Pierre X of E-Level had taken the monopoly on the media, and Gloria's affinity for the anti-Project movement had never seemed so determined.

"You do know the risk you're taking, my dear? And all this for another inspired soul who has discovered his mission by interpreting a paragraph of sorts:

"Your real name is St. Pierre X of E-Level and your mission is to stop the Project at all costs."

Brenda was being sarcastic but the cold look from her sister disconcerted her. Not only was Gloria serious; she was passionate. More than anything, Gloria wanted to abdicate.

"As you wish, but don't count on me to rescue you. Understand?"

"Thanks, dear sister, that's what I expected! Let me..."

Brenda raised her left index finger to interrupt, as she always did upon reception of a paragraph. She never did master the parallel process of a reception.

Whoever interprets this is an official participant of the Project. As such, the person is also creator of the Project, with the produced texts being the intellectual property of all of the participants and with the description of the Project itself being nothing other than some paragraphs generated by the Project.

"Here, this must have been for you, I'll ask the network to retransmit it—"

"You didn't hear what I just said: I am joining the ranks of the antipros. The Project: FINISHED for me. From now on, the paragraphs will pass like wind through my ears. And if I can, I will disconnect myself... Damn! Here comes another one..."

The Project does not truly exist; it is only an idea conceived by an individual in the 20th century. You who hear this may pass whatever judgment you wish on the present statement; it will have no impact on the future of man and the universe.

How could such a coincidence take place? wondered Gloria. Right when she was swearing to boycott the Project, the only sensible paragraph she had ever seen turned up. Never in 30 years of receiving messages had one had such an impact on her.

"Have it your way!" cried Brenda, on noticing the stupefied expression of her sister; Gloria seemed suspended in time.

Was this the famous spark about which the Fathers of the Project had spoken, the sublime instant when circumstances make us discover all the depth of a message which would have otherwise passed unnoticed? The Magic of the Project!

Ignoring her sister, Gloria let herself topple over in her deintox booth, a reaction Brenda knew well. The conversation was finished. She gathered her cloak and left the family nook. As she was going out the door,

she received one of the strangest paragraphs she had ever heard:

St. Pierre X of E-Level is not from E-Level and exists as much as colourless green ideas sleep furiously.

A broad smile stretched across Brenda's face. She knew now how she'd save her younger sister from the claws of this bastard St. Pierre. She'd do some research and dig up his past; if he didn't come from E-Level, he must be hiding a deplorable and undesirable past. The media would be keenly interested. Who was going to follow a pervert? What promise of a future could a liar offer?

If your system generates more than 10^{19} paragraphs per year, how many of these merit your interest? How many of this lot are merely interpretable? One out of 1 billion, one out of 100 billion, one out of a quadrillion?

The relationship that exists between the production of an interpretable paragraph and a noninterpretable paragraph is of the order of one half of 3.1415×10^{13} . If you have the impression that you're going around in circles, maybe that's because it's true.

Knowing already that a system generates 1 billion paragraphs per second, you can calculate how many of these paragraphs will be interpretable.

Any answer that a calculator can give can also be generated by the Project, witness: the program used in the Project frame gener-

ates 1 interpretable paragraph per minute if it is run on a system standardized by the Meganetwork, version 2.7 - 18 of the year 2067 of our era.

Which brings us to the following results: 10 million *sensible* paragraphs per minute, making up more than 5.3×10^{15} paragraphs per year! What a storehouse of ideas! The snag is that, even if, by the stratagem of the Project, you reduce by astronomical means the eternity required for the monkeys to produce these sensible and usable messages, it's necessary to be able to discern all that which is veracious in all that which is interpretable, to distinguish between that which is pure imagination and that which is true, real, authentic, or usable. Some examples:

Whoever interprets this is an official participant of the Project. As such, the person is also creator of the Project, with the produced texts being the intellectual property of all of the participants and with the description of the Project itself being nothing other than some paragraphs generated by the Project.

So then, what truth is there in this generation? In all likelihood, you don't feel concerned about the Project and you say to yourself that:

Even if all paragraphs of 600 or so characters are inevitably a part of the Project by its definition, it is evident that certain paragraphs, and even many, would have been conceived or imagined, indeed lived well before the beginning of the Project; which

makes the Project independent of time as a factor and makes all the paragraphs true and false at the same time.

I am neither making you say it, nor even think it. You see, it is already written! So it is again only a *matter of time*: all that you can think, all that I can conceive, the Project will take it over at one time or another. Moreover if I were a reader of the Project and I suddenly read the following paragraph on my system:

For every Project X, there exists a Project Y such that the set of paragraphs generated by Project X is in biunivocal relation with the set generated by Project Y, the only difference lying in the means used to generate interpretable paragraphs.

I would imagine that a brain which thinks an idea is much like a system which generates an interpretable paragraph.

Any idea conceived by a human brain is drawn from an arbitrary selection of a group of pre-fixed characters. The final selection is obtained by successive filtrations to eliminate any generation which does not adapt to the immediate environment of the conceiver of the idea. The conceiver establishes the feasibility of each idea by its truthfulness in relation to the real world which surrounds him.

The advantage of the Project is that 10 billion individuals are available to interpret ideas. If all of the paragraphs are centralized and redis-

tributed to this thinking population according to well chosen parameters (expertise, environment, experience, past records...) you'll obtain, perhaps, a better return of *bright ideas* and everyone will appear to be more intelligent—the Project being a common project. Evidently, there will always be messages which won't be of much use until certain individuals who can understand them are born.

The transcendental philosophy has the advantage, but also the obligation, to research its concepts following a principal, because they leave understanding pure and without mixed judgment as if from an absolute unity and, consequently, they are connected to themselves following a concept or an idea.

We are then preserving all of the messages generated for eventual re-interpretation so that a critique of simple reason can figure them out. For the more impatient, let's clarify: these postings cause no delay to the Project, since this last one will end up generating a way to reduce the time necessary to interpret all possible texts.

The memory of the Meganetwork is central to the project: each paragraph judged must be classified and memorized for subsequent phases of the Project. There is no difference between a paragraph generated and one memorized if it is the phase of the Project during which it is interpreted.

Ah, here we go again! The Project phases: we begin with simple paragraphs, isolated, then collect

them, compare them, paste them together. Perhaps there will be more meaning in the aggregate of all the subsets of 10 paragraphs than in that of all of the paragraphs considered as a unit. It stands to reason that not all ideas, not all concepts can be kept within a paragraph of 600 characters. Those more complex ideas demand long descriptions in order to be expressed in natural language.

For example, the marvellous story by Jorge Luis Borges, *The Library of Babel*, in which the author imagines a library containing all books possible, would require some forty paragraphs to be generated, and the story you are currently reading, more than one hundred.

But, as in Borges' story, or in this one which could only be a variant, to ask someone to pass judgment on a set of paragraphs, is to resolve to lose an infinity of sublimely essential messages (and that is the bludgeoning argument used by opponents of Phase II of the Project). Let us define a context to understand this state of things.

Suppose that you are actually a reader linked up to the Project in the year 2088. During your daily deintoxication session (which evidently replaces sleep, because you haven't been able to sleep since the beginning of the Project), your system spits out the following text:

(The output of your system is projected directly onto your eyeball by superimposing itself upon your normal field of vision or, if you are of the auditory type, in your inner ear, allowing you to attend to all your tasks

simultaneously; reading and judging paragraphs has really become second nature to you. Besides, some decades later, thanks to a brilliant idea generated by the Project, the paragraphs are injected directly into your brain by subelectric signals; almost as if you had given birth to the idea yourself.)

This last paragraph was poorly received; something which frequently happens during the deintox period. Consider it like a network parasite and reread the penultimate paragraph before reading the next one. The Project team (i.e. everyone) apologizes for any inconvenience this malfunction may have caused you.

The Project doesn't really exist: it is nothing more than an idea conceived by an individual in the 20th century. You who are reading this may pass whatever judgment you wish on the present text; it will have no impact on the future of man or of the universe.

You, who have been brought up since your earliest days in a world where the essence of the Project dominates all actions, quickly reject this text as insignificant; it is of no help to the Progress. It is nothing more than an anodyne message, a frivolity that your system makes use of the most often. Since this text doesn't correspond to your reality, you mark it as *useless*. To the trash! You continue your reading and, a little later, you come across this idea:

Any idea, whatever it may be, is always verified within a given context and not verified within another. On that account, an

idea itself has absolutely no value of truth; only the context to which it applies has truth. It is therefore the context which creates the truth, not your idea about the matter of truth. Furthermore, a context is evaluated according to the values of truth that it has generated itself.

You become meditative. You have used 11 seconds to read this paragraph, leaving only 49 for you to pass judgment, 49 seconds before the next idea comes to supersede the previous one. You go back over it, rethinking the previous paragraph that you eliminated, and you say to yourself that you could perhaps connect it to this last one, leaving the thread of this story open for another phase of the Project: the interpretation context will perhaps have changed sufficiently to necessitate a new evaluation of all of the texts.

Your thoughts become confused, the words lose their meaning. The following idea appears:

The context in which a paragraph is judged can itself be described by a finite subset of the Project's paragraphs, so all judgment on a single paragraph is equivalent to a judgment on a subset of other paragraphs.

You hesitate? Do you need to recall the last three paragraphs? Together are they not shaped by an idea that stands alone, that is worth collecting for further investigation?

For each Project X, there are a multitude of Projects Y which are all described by the texts generated by Project X. Conversely, all

the Projects Y will generate texts describing Project X in detail. Each reader (or thinker) is inevitably a part of one or the other or of many of these Projects.

Could there be someone else who, at this moment, is judging your own context, evaluating your environment, pondering your life to decide if it is likely, real, worthy of conserving or keeping? Is not our actual world simply one generated by some project? Does the end of the known universe depend on the rejection of a single idea by some sort of thinking being?

A universe is composed entirely of ideas that we get about it and exists only within the instant necessary for a reader to think it or for humanity to generate all possible paragraphs of whatever project. Does the universe exist when there is no one to conceive it? Do the stars depict man in their universe?

You can see that an isolated paragraph can take on a completely different meaning when inserted within the context of many others. It's as though you've added a subcontext to your own context; a game of overlapping contexts building themselves up, during which all becomes possible. See instead:

The group was now complete, the discussions had only to begin. The strained atmosphere only intensified their uneasiness with the physical contact. Some had preferred to make themselves up heavily to maintain a certain incertitude—reality being an almost inconceivable concept for

them—but the majority of the 42 emissaries left their true faces open to scrutiny.

St. Pierre XI, worthy predecessor of St. Pierre XII, shepherd of their destiny, and also the one who had insisted on this face-to-face without interface, stuck on a forced smile under nervous eyes. How could he possibly succeed in convincing them to undertake the action he proposed? A decision which would have an impact on their entire existence and on that of the global population of 26 billion. That's why he had insisted that they discuss it outside the network; he couldn't risk the slightest leak. To begin with, any gesticulations of the emissaries would be to his benefit in controlling the conversation.

He took a deep breath, interpreted by the others as the beginning of the discussion. He rose slowly, with an assumed dignity, and looked at St. Beatrice, sitting opposite him, with all the cruelty he could muster in his eyes, which is to say, a lot. He had only seen her on one other occasion, many years before. Today she appeared sick, emaciated, ghastly. The events were killing her; she couldn't fight much longer to keep her position. Tonight she would surrender to his proposals.

He received a paragraph just as he began to speak.

"Dear friends, we are meeting tonight to decide

I'm not sure any more when this idea came to mind.
our future. It is time to take a position on

I don't even know now if it is

the idea that I put forth in the last
miniyear. I

*truly mine. Had I heard it
elsewhere,*

know, by the comments that I've al-
ready received—" (quick,

had I made it mine subconsciously,
cruel glances toward St. Beatrice) "—
that unanimity

*did I take it over from someone
else?*

has not been reached and that we
must now debate

I have no idea.
it until a consensus is established."

He noted an infinitesimal pause
on the reception end of his paragraph,
marking it *useless* and continued his
speech.

"Half of you are opposed to the
idea of intervening directly in the past
although that is the only option which
remains open to us. All of our indirect
actions failed pitifully: the ideas to
sabotage the Project by riddling it with
false messages, with senseless mes-
sages, with repetitions, or by enclos-
ing a subliminal anti-Project content,
were all excellent, but insufficient."

St. Pierre XI thought for a moment
of the fictitious character, St. Pierre
the X of XI, whom he had succeeded
in creating in this 21st century by the
magic of well-placed paragraphs. A
sublime idea: create the artificial im-
age of an agitator who would incite
the population to a protest movement
solely by his *declarations*. A truly bril-
liant idea that he had cunningly bor-
rowed from St. Beuve but one which
he had greatly improved. An idea that
did not get results, for some unknown
reasons! The audience was growing

restless and he resumed his speech:

"We have perceived no change
in our 23rd century despite our sus-
tained efforts. We must now intervene
physically and eliminate the Project
initiators!" (Nervous movements in
the assembly, vague gestures of pro-
test, embarrassed coughs, and con-
senting grins.)

St. Pierre had finished and was
waiting for someone to open an argu-
ment. All eyes turned toward St.
Beatrice, who felt like a train passing
in front of a pasture of curious cows.
She lifted her nose and sucked in all
the air she could, her cheeks flushing
and eyelids batting like butterflies flap-
ping their wings.

When she began to speak, her
voice sounded so loud in the silence
that she both surprised and interrupted
herself. During the few seconds that
she took to regain control, she re-
ceived an idea on her interface:

*What you are about to say makes
no sense. You are advised to ac-
cept St. Pierre X's proposal. There
is no other solution to save hu-
manity from utter annihilation.*

St. Beatrice suddenly realized
that what she was about to say made
absolutely no sense: why believe that
the world could again become real
and cease to be the phantasmagorical
ersatz that it had become over the
centuries? The Project itself had led
humanity to create a virtual world
where all is possible, where each idea
can find a context in which it will be
verified.

Man was no longer living from
the experience of the physical world

but at the convenience of random generations. All things being possible, with no direction being given to progress, and with all directions becoming an avenue, nothing was really happening any more. Humanity was going to disappear into chaos because, like any random process, the Project was leading to the most complete disorder. St. Beatrice caught hold of this fact in an instant and, when she began to speak again, it was to say:

"What I was about to say makes no sense. We are advised to accept the proposal of St. Pierre XI. There is no other solution to save humanity from utter annihilation."

This wise message was accepted with sighs of relief and smiles of satisfaction. Even those most reticent of any direct intervention accepted this about-face of their leader without hesitation, because nobody wished to become sick, emaciated, and ghastly.

Afterwards, the events precipitated: subcommittees were formed to organize the attack, to decide on the right moment to strike, to make contingency plans, etc. St. Beatrice herself directed the small group assigned the mission to exterminate the Project instigators.

In the brouhaha of general euphoria, St. Beatrice isolated herself and rethought the Project paragraph that had convinced her to change her mind. She realized, *a posteriori*, that it was a coincidence and not a divine message; the paragraph was referring to St. Pierre *the tenth* and not St. Pierre *the eleventh*. She paled some more until another paragraph relieved

her:

If you search well, you will always end up finding a sense of reality in an idea. What you decide or even what you think has no importance; something must inevitably happen and that is what counts. This obligatory chain of events or ideas creates Time and Time is all, including the Project.

She sighed and a bit of colour came back into her face. Time passed.

It is time to confess the truth to you: you have always been an extraordinary visionary because of the Project paragraphs, but even when you read the paragraphs which followed, you didn't believe them.

Rather obscure, isn't it? Even I can't understand it; at this level I know nothing more about it than you who are reading, and we are completely interchangeable.

You read this and you have the impression that you are reading a story written by someone else. However, you are the author. You are suffering from an acute case of amnesia and truly believe that you are not the author.

If, like me, you are reading this text for the second (or nth) time, you catch on that the meaning changes with each reading and that that means nothing since it never says the same thing.

You have, nevertheless, left this message in the Project (as though it is part of it and perhaps it really is) to bring you back to real-

ity if ever all went wrong.

It all began in the 21st century with the Project. Yes, a project really does exist and you are one of the individuals responsible for its initiation. That is why they pursue you today like they did in the future (which is now the past).

These people come from the 23rd century and travel in time thanks to a discovery made following the reading of a Project paragraph. They want to eliminate all of the Project instigators since it is leading the 23rd century and all of humanity to catastrophe. The fact is that not only good ideas are being generated by the Project.

Sometimes even good ideas are misinterpreted or misused, which is just as baneful as to put a bad idea into practice. For example, the fact that 42 is the Answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe and Everything, could very well drive certain individuals to the worst extreme. Yet an author who would write a story springing from that fact could very well drive the reader to the greatest of pleasures.

The fact is that the travellers of the 23rd century are hoping to resolve their problems by eliminating all of the Project instigators, because a text generated in the 31st century and miraculously rediscovered has made them hope that your disappearance will lead to the instant disappearance of the Project itself. They have tried to abort the

Project by mining it with false messages that attempted to convince their readers of the unreality of the Project, of its uselessness, but all in vain.

This whole idea of the Project is far-fetched and is leading us nowhere, I confess. Stop your reading now; it can only do you good.

Since you're still here, an act of violence seems to be the only suitable solution. Unfortunately—or fortunately, depending on the context—you will have been warned of the imminent danger by a paragraph that you were in the middle of reading when the Project adversaries arrived in your century.

You persist in continuing! What must be done to make you stop? Cut off the paper? Write the word END?

Strengthened by the warning, you have set a clever trap for your future pursuers and, to their surprise, have easily immobilized them. Knowing that others like them would come to finish the work, you decide to use their time travel machine to disappear.

Time travel machines can take diverse forms, even abstract ones, and are, in fact, only modifiers of spatial and temporal references. The displaced subject is not really displaced: only his context of interpretation changes. And it's less tiring that way.

In your great wisdom (or maybe a paragraph gave you the idea), you have taken the precaution of leaving some warning messages

(judiciously camouflaged as Project paragraphs, of which they are a part anyway) in case your voyage in time should take a bad turn. It is this that you are currently reading.

You find yourself back in the 20th century safe and sound, but with your memory somewhat disturbed. You can no longer distinguish between your true memories of simple paragraphs generated by the Project and reflections you have had about them. Your brain has done its best to reset a likely universe in your new context of life. You have constructed for yourself a normal life for a person evolving in the 20th century, relegating your whole 21st century world to the imagination and the subconscious.

But this idea of the Project, which was your daily life during each second of your existence in the future, resurged in spite of you, became once again an original idea to haunt you and to demand action.

There, my story is truly finished now. I believed that it was original, but the bottom line is that it isn't, or in fact, it is no longer, since it is now written and read. How do you write a story that has never been written, read, or even imagined?

Our own lives, our daily experiences are perhaps the reading of someone else, or vice versa. Have you never read a sentence, a paragraph, an excerpt of a story, which makes direct reference to your personal experience, as if fiction and reality, beyond improbable coincidences, called out to each other?

And without knowing why, you have restarted the Project in your new context. You set about reading what others had already written; you have conceived, and put into context, all sorts of ideas. Your brain has become a Project machine, preceding the technology that others will develop in some period.

You can no longer ignore the fact that the Project which you have reinitiated will inevitably end by reproducing unfortunate events, regardless of the context, and that individuals will hold you responsible.

All Projects, whatever they may be, and all things being equal, your warning message of the 21st century is found once again now in your thoughts: individuals will come next to annihilate you, to put an end to the Project. Prepare to change context, to modify your points of reference. •

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LOVE IN THE ATOMIC AGE

by Brian Burke

H is awkward self strains
warps
to accommodate her classical form
in their unbalanced embrace
they forge
barge across paths of least resistance
as lightning flows
not blind to incompatibilities
but blind to physics sub
atomic particles
to grand unifying forces
& coupling constants

they suffer unknown $\frac{2}{3}$ quarks?
the invasion of hypothetical partners
carrying fractional char

ges
they attack with inertia
maintaining uniform motion
until acted upon by outside forces
which contribute to the degradation
of their already imperfect or
bits

despite proton acceleration
 & neutrino collisions
 they remain coupled but her unpregnant
 in that other world full of constants
 & inconsistencies
 not enough proton between them
 to produce a person

enduring inactive half-lives half habit
 & half wishful thinking bind them together
 fearful of any atom-splitting explosions
 he always donating electrons
 on couches & in bed
 proportioning greater space weighted in deference
 to her greater volume
 her absorbing energy
 while their rotation impels them a

part

outward from their axes
 though still melded centrifugally together
 until she capricious mercurial
 inverts the equation upends the universe
 & bulks above his body:
 gravity

ultimately
 unstable pro
 tons accelerate de
 cay

seeking greater
 density
 they discover instead critical
 mass

the dis in te gra tion of
 uni

verses

be

gins
 under the interaction of their own emotional
 radioactivity
 contaminating for eternity
 the genetic codes of all their impossible children •



CULTURE SHOCK

by Karin Lowachee

illustrated by Adrian Kleinbergen

Mayane headed out the offices to the lev, her grip so tight on the briefcase she no longer had feeling in her fingers. She forced herself to walk casually, any other worker leaving for the day. Smile at faces and mumble pleasantries. Down the lev went, doing no favours for her stomach, sixty floors, to the lobby. Granger of Security greeted her and the other passengers as they stepped out. She gave him a direct smile and a how-do-you-do, kept walking. *Tap tap* of boots on the polished dark blue floor, not too frantic, not too slow. Out the glass doors of the Towers, still with the casual stride in case someone watched from behind or above.

Mayane unclipped her ID bracelet and stuffed it in her skirt pocket. At a glance she was not the Assistant to the Station Liaison Officer, not a person who hobnobbed with leaders of the newly formed united government; the anonymity helped the state of her stomach. Still, thoughts persisted about Reagunn Valstrom, her boss, who was intimate with the Secretary of Security. That did nothing for her present paranoia, considering what she planned to do.

The thought made her take a quick look around. Nothing, of course. If they were following they would not be obvious, certainly not to an untrained eye.

They wouldn't follow. They didn't know she knew. She just had to go home, make a few calls—

Not from home. No traces. A public booth was better. But to make the call she had to use her ID, and that was a clear trace. How could she contact her sister when she couldn't even use the phone?

A hand touched her elbow, a body suddenly beside her, steering her away from the street crowd.

"Ms. Darrow."

She twisted, caught a man in a dark suit. Handsome face. Dead flat eyes. "What're you doing? Let go of me."

"Mr. Valstrom would like to see you."

She didn't fight, did not hurry her pace. "I'm just going home. Can't it wait?" Inside, her heart hammered. Valstrom knew. "Why didn't he beep me?"

"You've disengaged your ID, Ms. Darrow."

Stupid. It was suspicious. She should have known better. But she figured the escort would have still come, just to make sure she didn't bolt. That was Valstrom's procedure.

They were going back to the Towers. The aide, agent—Mayane only guessed—still held her elbow in a firm but painless grip. She told herself this was just routine, Valstrom had to clear something up, perhaps go over one of her reports.

Sure. "I—oh no, I think I've dropped my ID." She wriggled herself loose to pat around on the sidewalk.

"Ms. Darrow—"

Mayane slammed her elbow into his crotch, heard him gasp and groan, and was up and running without another thought. She pushed people aside, heard the recovered man's heavy steps behind her. A quick look caught him reaching into his jacket, drawing out something thin and black.

Her briefcase flapped about as she raced pell-mell down the city walk, dodging vending bots and people, bouncing from those she couldn't avoid. She was in good shape but the agent was no doubt trained. She had to lose him somehow; she could not outrun him. The sun was setting, the city lights coming up and casting shadows.

Mayane charged across the

street, skipping away from rush hour traffic, hearing her pursuer's breath in the low rumble of the airwings' engines. Faces blurred, sweat running into her eyes. The buildings changed from the slick surfaces of the government section to the chaotic designs of the commercial blocks. Music and ranging lights played over her senses, drowning out her own ragged breathing. People swore at her, faces and styles gone foreign and dangerous. It became harder to push through the crowd, to see ahead, harder to hear footsteps from behind.

"Please," she gasped, disoriented. "Please, he's trying to kill me—" Any moment a shot could hit her and they'd say some crazy in the jumble had taken her out.

The lights were dim here, in need of recharge. She moved in dreamlike chaos, twisting, stumbling. Breemers on repulser blades whirled by, up walls, off 'wings, blurs of dusky armour and patched colour. Others displayed carnival grotesquery. Pupils slit like a snake's. Yellow avian eyes, altered features.

She had blindly come into this place not even a security agent dared enter without cover. Her briefcase was a poor weapon, her clothes a beacon. Voices came from all sides: *Govie myn, you lookin' for a trip? Whazza suit like you doin' in the Digs?*

Suddenly the cityrats stepped away from her, forming a pocket she stood alone in. The sun had set, leaving flickering light from dented poles that cast too many moving shadows. She shivered and forced breath, the only sound in a city gone silent, and dared not move.

A Breemer in magenta and black armour skidded through the circle of silent watchers. Mayane stared in terrified fascination as he stopped under the light. A hawkish face, a long scar on one cheek. Complicated knots of coloured cloth twined in his black mane. The intricacies of design marked him a man with influence in the Digs. She'd read that it was so.

He floated a handspan off the pavement, a narrow red glow running the length of his feet: the repulser blades. The crimson beam reflected off hard surfaces, levitated the body depending on how high it was set. It was an art with them, the fine tuning to just the right intensity. His handblades were deactivated, looking like harmless black gauntlets. But one swipe from those palms on full repulser mode and she'd be decapitated. She had no delusions.

He would kill her as easily as the agent and with the same lack of remorse. Of that she was certain.

"Not often," he began, in a rusty voice that all gathered could hear, "we get govie myns in the Digs, neh?" Black eyes watched her like a bird of prey. He bladed closer and the crowd moved in. Breemers hung off walls like spiders, glowing blue at their hands and feet, the beam bonding them to the surface. Others were wrapped around lightpoles, monkeys in sculpted armour.

"Please," she whispered, looking the scarred Breemer in the eyes, never mind her upset stomach. "I was chased. Someone's trying to kill me."

"Is this unusual, govie myn?" He laughed. Others did, a hollow sound. Then the smile disappeared and the predator eyes were on her again.

"Who wants to kill you, govie myn?"

Mayane swallowed. "The man I work for. I—I know too much." She wondered what she would have to tell this Breemer to buy her pass. Wondered if he cared at all. "Please, I've got information I have to trans—"

"Top secret, yah?" the Breemer cut in. His right handblade activated with an audible whir, bloodred. He scraped the beam idly against his thigh armour. "Neh neh, govie myn. You want out the Digs, you convince me. You convince me you ain't another Uni wantin' to break up the Breemer movement."

"I'm not—" she started on a panicked breath. "Please, the stations, they're in danger. The Separatists on the stations—"

She stopped when the Breemer held up his hand, seeing the red beam, narrow and sharp. He swung and bladed away, disappearing in shadow and bodies. Mayane blinked, jumped when two Breemers came up on either side, one of them motioning her ahead with a glue-blue palm. She went, her two escorts floating beside like dark angels. The crowd stirred and became transient again. A handful of Breemers trailed her, moving further into the heart of their territory.

Mayane wanted to be sick, wanted out of this place. She may not have been safe on her side of the line, but she doubted her security in this circus. Breemers walking on walls, swinging from lightpole to lightpole. Glue-blue and repulser red beams. She felt herself swallowed in it, going down a throat of people she knew nothing about. And they were not mere punks, troublemakers and with no ambition. They were a Voice, a

Movement—anti-Unification, to be sure—and worldwide. Like the new government. She'd heard Breemers had ties to the Separatists. Whatever they were, Breemers had their own rules, their own culture to protect. And they owned the Digs.

Owned...much more than the Digs. If the rumours were true.

If she could make this leader Breemer listen, if it was true they were Separatist symps—they could transmit the warning for her. No traces. No trouble for her.

Except now Valstrom knew she knew; she could never go back to her job, her home.

Home was foreign in this place she walked, dark streets and alleys, through a maze of dilapidated buildings and drifting scents. The Breemers swarmed around her, haloes of coloured cloth and dusky armour. The glow of red repulser streams guided her, an escort of demonic fireflies.

Finally one of the Breemers bladed close to Mayane's side and directed her into a squat, windowless building. Inside was pitch black, making her glad of the guiding hand. She felt herself spiralling down a ramp until they came out into a cavernous room, lit medium-bright with Breemers everywhere.

They clung to the walls, the ceiling, or squatted on the floor. Every surface was scarred by repulser and glue-blue beams. They bladed around her, eyeing her openly as her guard moved her toward the centre of the arena. She saw male and female Breemers, discerning them by the shape of their body armour. All had long hair, some more intricately braided than others, lithe forms and

clear, watchful eyes. Mayane stopped staring when her escort presented her to the magenta and black Breemer.

"First," the leader said in that same rough voice, "we exchange names. Yah? I am Huntereye, Speaker for the Digs-Toronno Bladeforce."

Mayane swallowed, tried not to shiver. It was cold in the basement and Huntereye's gaze was not encouraging. She tried to tell herself this was a good beginning. "My name is Mayane Darrow. I'm Assistant to the Station Liaison Officer."

His face was stone. "The SLO is the myn who wants to kill you."

"I—I think he found out what I intended to do..." She trailed off, seeing his expression change. Lines around his mouth deepened in a frown. The Speaker bladed closer, strips of cloth on his body sailing behind like a banner.

"Go on, Mayane Darrow."

She took a deep breath. "Some on the stations are discontent. They don't like the policies of this new government. The Unis, as you say, want control of Aurelia, Frede, Ilona. But their first priority is Earth, with all the protest that's been going on. So there've been accidents upside, old equipment breaking down, seals failing, contamination. Stationers need more funding to get back on their feet. The government's kept it all quiet, as I'm sure you're aware."

"Not wanting to look bad," Huntereye stated.

She nodded briefly. "But they can't keep it quiet for long. The Separatist movement upside is growing stronger. Dirtside rebellion is increasing. Some still don't want a unification. Too many individual interests are

lost. You understand."

He raised his chin. "We Breemers smell a dictatorship in this unification. We Breemers know who really works the unioners."

She didn't say the name. "You are Separatist, then?"

"We be Breemers," he replied.

So they admitted nothing. She had to continue; she was in it already. "Leaders are afraid of their growing autonomy, afraid of the growing Separatist movement. So they plan to stop it. Cause another 'accident' upside. A big one. Take out the instigators and keep a total dirtside blank-out. Very clandestine. I think they've got stationers working for them."

A slight crease appeared between Huntereye's brows. "But another accident will rally the Separatists upside, yah?"

"Not if their leaders are dead and pressure from non-symp increases. Which it will. They'll bargain. Don't act up and you'll get the stuff you need. A little at a time, you realize."

"But no autonomy."

"No autonomy."

He was silent. The arena had gone silent, motionless. Huntereye rubbed his handblades on his armour, same idle motion.

"You a govie spy?" he asked suddenly.

Mayane blinked. "No, I'm just an assistant. But I overheard Valstrom talking a couple of weeks ago. I pieced it together from other meetings I heard and...and I've a sister upside. She had suspicions." She took a breath. "Today confirmed it. Valstrom wanted me to send a communiqué to a scientist upside and I...well, I unscrambled it myself. The message was

quite clear. I sent it but I think Valstrom got on to me from the unscrambling, a tag on my computer or something. I should've known..."

Huntereye waved his handblade. "That is of no consequence."

"But he wants to kill me now. I've got nowhere to go!" She didn't mean to sound afraid, but she doubted she had made any lasting impression on this cold Breemer, doubted they would help her. "I have to warn the station Separatists of the sabotage."

"Who do you think you will link with, govie myn? You can't just call a Separatist, unless your sister has ties."

"She's not active but she's no union lover. She might know how to contact them—"

"Your ID is probably voided," Huntereye stated. "You are a govie myn. Why should we trust you?"

Breemers began to move in from all sides, swift as airwings. Their silence unnerved her. Mayane gripped her briefcase for what protection it offered.

"My sister's on Frede—"

"So you say."

"I work for the Liaison Office. My job is to help the stationers!"

"You are a spy. You want to infiltrate the Breemers."

"No! I was chased!"

"So you say."

"Please—" She felt Breemers crowding her, closing out her line of sight. "Please, I must get a link upside. I have to tell them before it's too late!" She saw all her hope being burned in this Breemer's dark, dispassionate eyes. Fool, she wanted to scream. Fool!

Then through the silence came a

clatter of armour on stone. Three brightly clad Breemers skidded in, out of breath and panicked.

"Huntereye!" one of them yelled, a young man. He resembled the Speaker. "Commotion on the line. Some govies tryin' to pass as Hatt Isle Breemers. Says they some of Silverdisk's Bladeforce. Neh neh, we scope 'em straight."

She looked at Huntereye, found his black gaze on her.

"You brought them to the Digs," he said, toneless.

"They followed me. They want to kill me!"

"No time, Huntereye," the youth said. "We hook it, now. Bring the govie myn, yah? Scope 'er later."

Someone grabbed at her briefcase. She swung, came nose to nose with a bronze-skinned Breemer, eyes like rubies. They both held on, frozen, as the arena erupted in shouts.

"I'd let go, govie myn," the woman said, voice low and fierce. One hand came up, repulser red. "Unless you want to lose an arm."

"This is mine."

Teeth flashed, a shark's smile. Almost respectful. "I will keep it for you, yah?"

Huntereye was suddenly there, kicking the briefcase from both their grips. It bounced across the floor in sudden silence.

Mayane's limbs went rigid with shock. She stared at the Speaker, wondering what was next.

"You know how to blade, govie myn?" He grinned like a serpent. A Breemer approached with armour, strips of coloured cloth, boots and gauntlets. "You be Breemer now, govie. One of my bladeforce. Suit

up."

•

She had bladed a couple times for recreation, but not with the power Breemers used. "I—I don't know if I can handle this level—" Two Breemers snapped armour plates on her, over the loose pants and shirt they had provided. They were even doing her hair, a simple knot of red in her brown tangle. "But—"

"Do not look so grim." Huntereye watched with a slightly amused expression. "My broder Featherblade will guide you." He indicated the young man who grinned at her, hanging upside down from a metal bar in the wall, hair cascading like an auburn waterfall. "You claim you are with us. Now you will prove it, govie myn."

"But why this?" She indicated the outfit with a flap of arms.

"Disguise, Mayane Darrow. If they do catch us, which I doubt, you will not be so easy a target."

That assurance did nothing for her nerves. Neither did the shout from the doorway: "Allay, allay!" Breemers swarmed as Featherblade flipped down beside her with an enviable grace, activated on all limbs. He showed her the two finger combinations to activate the glue-blue and repulser beams. Mayane copied the repulser combinations carefully, felt herself rise off the ground. She lost her balance immediately and Featherblade had to grab her arm.

"I'm not used to this!" she snapped in frustration. Hoping it didn't sound like panic. Featherblade grinned at her.

"Neh neh, govie myn. Pretend you still on the ground. No diff, yah?

Like so." He bladed around her, a foot in the air. Spread his blue palms. "Yah? Now you try."

"Feather!" Huntereye shouted from above, stuck to the ceiling so all could see him. "Allay. Drag the govie myn if you must. The pseudo-Brees broke through." Then he disappeared out the door. Breemers followed, the lights dimming fast.

"Come." Featherblade motioned to her.

She bladed perpendicular to the floor, slowly, trying not to fall on her face. Fear made her limbs rigid, not a good thing if you wanted to blade—she still wasn't sure if they were helping or leading her to her death. Huntereye had made no promises.

Featherblade circled back, grabbed her hand in his deactivated gloved one and pulled her along. They followed the stream of Breemers through the curving tunnel; the only illumination came from the beams.

"Where are we going? Featherblade?" Hers was the only voice. The silence of so many people was disconcerting.

"Up," came his short reply.

"Will I get that link? I must warn—"

"Soon, govie myn. Soon."

She felt air through her hair, felt herself turning, scraping the wall. "But—"

"Neh neh. Too many questions."

Commotion became increasingly loud as they neared the surface. Harsh voices and the roar of engines. She saw a door open, city lights spilling in and Breemers blading out. She thought she saw policewings past the swarm of bodies.

Featherblade jerked her back.

"Neh. Not there. They scope pollies but you come."

"What's going on?" she demanded, finding her feet stable under her at last. She pulled her hand free. "Featherblade, I want answers now!"

"When you busy suiting up Huntereye tap into govie links, yah? Your boss say you stole files. So pollies scopin' the Digs, think you're criminal. Got holos of you. Some govies out there masquin' as Breemers. Shots can go, shots can cross. Govies want you dead. Do I scope it right?"

She couldn't get past the sour taste in her throat.

Featherblade led her out a back way, behind a handful of Breemers. The Digs were alive, Breemers and cityrats protesting wildly to the influx of uniforms. Featherblade pulled her away from it all.

"Where are you taking me?"

They rounded the corner of the alley, came face to face with a policewing. Bright lights came up, blinding her.

"Up!" Featherblade shouted. Mayane backed away instinctively, blinking the spots from her sight as two cops jumped from their 'wing and came toward her. "Up!"

Featherblade clambered up the side of the building, glowing blue at his hands and feet. She fingered the activation as she ran, felt it sputter in her right hand, tried again with more care even as her stomach was going ballistic. She slapped herself against the wall, clawed up, praying the beam would not fail her.

The cops didn't shoot. Her stomach began to unwind as she neared the roof and saw Featherblade's legs

go over the side. Then she saw why the cops weren't giving chase: a copter humming above them, strobing the roof with yellow beams.

"Quickly," Featherblade urged, ahead of her in a spider's crawl, finding pockets of darkness. Mayane's mind reeled. She had to deactivate the blue, activate the red before she could blade after him. Her fingers tangled in confusion. She stumbled after him, focused on his stream of red hair.

Warning shots came down, making her jump. The copter was descending, a voice shouting. Featherblade vaulted over the opposite side of the building and disappeared from view.

"Wait!" Mayane gasped in panic. She dived for the edge, fingering the glue-blue, felt herself jar to a stop against the wall, face down. The alley far below was teeming with Breemers, cops and stabs of flashlight. Featherblade swung from a fire escape, over to the wall of the neighbouring building. He stuck like a fly, spread-eagled, and turned to look over his shoulder.

"Follow me!"

"Like hell," she shouted raggedly, forcing herself not to look down. "There's five bloody meters from here to there!"

"Jump!"

No choice. Cops fired at Breemers but their armour took the worst of it. For now. Mayane leapt to the fire escape, gritted her teeth at the sudden stop, hands hard on the metal. She switched to repulser mode, cranked up the power and launched herself from the platform, fingering the blue beam frantically. Her left hand activated, slapped against the wall a lit-

tle lower than Featherblade's position. Her other limbs flailed wildly as she tried to gain balance. Then she was plastered to the surface, breathing hard and shaking in every bone.

"Not bad for a rookie." Featherblade laughed.

"Blind luck," she replied, and found herself grinning.

"Must work on style later. Come. We meet Huntereye." He began to wriggle sideways to a window.

They swung through, landing heavily on the floor. It looked like another abandoned building. He led her down narrow stairs, floor after floor, into the basement. Through a door that looked like a wall. More tunnels, dimly lit.

"Who made these?" she asked. "You Breemers?"

"Yah." He cast her a dark-eyed glance. "Connects some Breemers hideouts. You the first govie myn to see."

She held his gaze. "You trust me now?"

He shrugged, looked ahead. She was not comforted. There was no telling with Breemers. They might not like owing a govie after they let her send the message. Featherblade's young face gave no indication. His hands glowed red as he bladed along. He was Huntereye's brother; she had no doubts where his loyalties lay.

After long minutes of blading through silent corridors they came to a narrow steel door. Featherblade touched a codepad on the wall with the back of his gauntlet.

The door swung open. Mayane moved to follow Featherblade through but he shouted suddenly and leapt back on his blades. "Ambush!" he

cried as shots rained out, slamming into her chest armour and throwing her to the ground. Things blacked out, came back dim and shadowy. Someone grabbed at her, dragging her out to her feet, but she just wanted to lie down, catch her breath...

"Up up!" a voice screamed in her ear. Somehow she forced her rubbery limbs to obey, clung to the colourful body that pulled her along. Heat spread along her back and something wet and sticky ran down her face. The body pulling her stumbled and she fell on top in a tangle of limbs. She saw red, long red hair...

Lights streamed overhead, blue and red ghosts and horrible banshee screaming...so many colours.... Her nose burned, her ears numb. Someone pulled at her again, dragging her off the body. Noise faded until she heard only snatches of hollow voices.

"...Got 'em. All dead..."

"Feather—get him up—"

"What 'bout 'er? She looks zombed..."

"Bring them quickly. Allay!"

She moved, looked down and saw bodies lying strangely with their eyes open. Someone was bending over them, picking up long black shapes, rolling the bodies aside. Her head rested against an armoured shoulder. They took her to that steel door she remembered, into a low-ceilinged room with computers along the walls. She thought she needed a computer...

"Looks like they left the equipment," someone said.

"I think they just got here ahead of Feather, ahead of us."

"How'd they know?"

"Damn govie spies..." A quieter

voice. "I want you to run checks. Every damn one of our Bladeforce. Meanwhile keep your eyes open. We gotta vacate soon as she sends her message..."

Things blanked out, came back in a vague mishmash of images and noises. They laid her down on the floor. A dark-haired face bent over, put something under her nose. A sharp scent slammed into her head. She blinked, recognized Huntereye's predator gaze. He had a rifle slung over his shoulder. Her brain felt swollen but most of the haze was gone.

"Don't get up," he growled, moving away. She turned her head, saw him bending over Featherblade. He cradled his brother's body, woke him up the same way.

"Is he all right?" Mayane asked hoarsely, wishing the pain would stop. No one answered her. Breemers swarmed, helping the wounded, muttering amongst themselves. "Huntereye, the link—"

The Speaker helped Featherblade to sit up. Mayane saw blood dripping from the auburn hair. His armour was burned through in places. Hers was the same; she felt the bruises and tingling heat. Featherblade gave her a rueful smile.

"Not good move, yah? Bladin' to an ambush." He glanced at his brother. "Thought you'd be here first."

"Got hooked." Huntereye frowned worriedly. Then he turned to Mayane. "Better? Come. Your link."

A Breemer helped her to her feet. She stumbled after Huntereye to a console and leaned there heavily, brushing moisture from her face. Her glove came away red.

"Suns and thunder..." Vision

greyed.

"Not bad." Huntereye drew her eyes to his smudged face. "Head wounds look worse than they are, neh? You live." Then he grinned and it was so unexpected she just stared. He looked much like Featherblade right then.

"The link," she mumbled, forcing her head to clear, and squinted at the console. Huntereye slid an ID card from the inside of his gauntlet, slapped it into a vidslot. He tapped keys and a screen popped up from the console and derezzed. "Whose card?" Mayane asked.

"Non-person. So govies can't trace, yah? Underground link, anyway. Underground to upside."

A face appeared on the vid, crew-cut grey hair and pale eyes. The woman squinted, fiddled something off-vid.

"That you, Hunter? You look like you been through a war!"

"Something like," the Speaker said. "Trouble dirtside, Jaz. Pollies crawling the Digs. This govie myn's got a message."

The woman's eyes hardened. "Govie? Hunter, you crazy?"

"I was with the Liaison Office," Mayane broke in. "I've got a sister on station, Keria Darrow. She's a pilot."

"What the hell's going on, Hunter?" Jaz's hands moved off-vid and a moment later she looked hard at Mayane. "I confirm your sister, govie. What d'you say?"

So Mayane explained, quick, and watched Jaz's eyes grow cold. She didn't say a word but looked at Huntereye. The Speaker nodded to some silent question, straightened up with a flick of his long black hair.

"Done," he said, and blanked the vid, pulling out the ID card.

Mayane looked at him in confusion. "What?"

"We're moving," he said roughly. "The Separatists. We know what the govies're willing to do, yah? Now we stand openly. Breemers and Seps, upside and dirtside."

Mayane blinked, feeling her headache grow, not sure of what she heard. "You're talking about unified rebellion."

He nodded once. The room was flat silent. "Been preparing for years. Now's the time. Ain't no Uni gov's gonna lord it over the stations and us Breemers. They want to squash us Breemers 'cause we a Voice for the Common. Govies not want a Voice anywhere but in their Towers, but we see stationers, we see ourselves. Want the same thing. Even rule. Unification's nothing when one man's really runnin' the boards."

He spoke true. She knew the one man, had gone to dinner functions he'd attended. President Baki of the NorthAm sector, who had weight enough to throw around the world. He was the chief mover for unification, he was behind the Powers wanting control over the stations. Baki had convinced the other leaders a unification would eliminate the Separatists and their few dirtside symps—because the Seps on station had existed long before the unification, when they'd had a Voice in the governments.

But when that Voice had grown stronger some did not want it: enter Baki and the Unis. Convince others in the government that the Separatists were a threat, unify to put down that

threat, and the Earth would prosper. Because the Unis would have control over the stations' resources.

But Baki hadn't counted on the rise of dirtside support for the Seps, and the violent objection to unification.

Separatists had seen it coming. No doubt the Breemers had, who seemed to be involved as deeply as the stationers. With more mystery in their origins.

Now there would be open war. This was what her news started. But she knew if it wasn't that it would be something else, soon.

"You're not just a Breemer Speaker, are you?" Mayane met Hunter-eye's stare. His eyes were hard as always, but something sad flickered

behind them, a knowledge of what lay ahead. "People will die."

"People have died," Featherblade said for his brother. "Upside. Dirtside. What will you do, govie myn, now that your message's through?"

Mayane thought of her sister up there in the middle of it. Not all the stationers would join the cause. Many still had strong ties to the government. Stationer against stationer, dirtsider against dirtsider. She looked from one set of dark eyes to the other, fingered her right handblade until it glowed repulser red.

"Govie myn?" She felt her face pull into a grim smile. "I contradict, Breemer myns. You said I was a part of your bladeforce. So let me prove it." •

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MAMASAN

by Bonnie Blake

illustrated by Nancy Niles

Shonogo, the skilled and honourable Samurai lizard, walked two steps past the lotus pond. A peasant paused in his rice gathering to bow. Shonogo bowed in return.

The Samurai reached the bamboo bridge just as a Ninja leaped out from behind a pippala tree. Shonogo swung his sword. The Ninja transformed into treasure.

"Mitchell," said Noreen. "Shut off the computer and go out to play. Don't go near McCormick's yard. That horrid pitbull is tied outside again."

Mitchell sighed, passed his hand over his brush cut and removed the disk. Whenever he felt the link clearing, Mamasan would disrupt it.

At lunch time, Mitchell raced in for a sandwich and two glasses of milk. "Please don't come into the back yard until I call you," he told his mother."

She nodded absently.

At supper, Mitchell wolfed down his food. "Come out as soon as you're done," he said.

"I'm done now," said Noreen as she pushed her plate away.

He led her out the back door.

"A rock garden," he explained with a wave of his hand. "Now you won't be upset when the flowers don't grow the way you like."

Noreen gasped.

"See the way the sand is raked into waves. If you sit and watch, it will make you feel good."

"Where did you get the sand?" shrieked his mother. She dug her fingers into his small shoulder.

"From the sandbox."

"Just because you don't play in the sand any more is no reason to throw it around the yard."

"I was careful not to get any on the grass. There are seven big rocks, but no matter where you stand, you can only see six. That was hard to do. Look, Mamasan."

"Go to your room. Your father will be home in an hour and then we'll see."

"Life is suffering," muttered Mitchell.

•

"What is wrong with that child?" said Noreen.

"He's just being a kid," said her husband Alex.

"All I can say is, thank God we only have one."

"Noreen, be fair. Mitchell is a good boy. You're much too hard on him."

"How would you know? You're never here."

"Be fair, Noreen. I've taken him with me on trips when I could. I give you afternoons to yourself when I'm home. Mitchell and I get along fine together."

"That's because you let him do whatever he wants."

Alex leaned back in his chair and undid his tie. "Maybe you should think about getting a job."

"You promised I could stay home and paint," she said.

"When's the last time you picked up a brush?"

"Mitchell ruins my garden and now you're picking at me."

"You never seem to be happy any more."

"What's to be happy about an

eleven year old who ruins my things and calls me stupid names? He's so defiant, I find myself fighting not to become enraged."

"What names?" said Alex.

"Mamasan. Why is he being rude like that?"

"It's just some kind of phase. I'll talk to him about it."

"And the garden?"

"I'll tell him no more landscaping without permission."

"Very funny, Alex. The soil is ruined now."

"It was just a weed pit to begin with. It can't look any worse."

Noreen flung back her chair and ran to the bedroom. The lock clicked into place.

■

Noreen poised her brush over the paper. She had been painting, just nothing she wanted to show Alex. She did not want him to question the images. She was not sure herself from where they came.

Once, she'd begun by painting a landscape with a snowcapped mountain in the distance, and ended with an picture of twisted, broken flowers and shrubs. Another time, she'd discovered Mitchell's face hidden in the trunk of a blighted peach tree. His mouth was open in a soundless scream. She felt suddenly ill. She ran to the sink, shoved aside the jars and brushes, and vomited in an angry gush. A third time, a skeletal hand and foot appeared in the middle of a bouquet of cherry blossoms.

•

Noreen watched the boys through the front window. Mitchell and his friend Joseph shouted and

taunted each other in a boisterous game of tag. Mitchell might not fit comfortably into her life, but he had no trouble with his peers. His speed and coordination guaranteed he was among the first chosen for any team sport.

Joseph was a new friend, recently arrived from Croatia. He was still learning to speak English, but tag was a game that crossed all barriers.

McCormick's pitbull barked wildly. Joseph looked up, stumbled over the curbing and fell onto the asphalt driveway. Immediately, Mitchell ran to his side and helped him up. Joseph clutched his knee as they staggered toward the house. As Noreen held the door for them, Joseph fought back the tears.

"Joseph needs a bandaid," said Mitchell.

After the first aid was complete, Noreen provided the boys with chocolate milk and peanut butter cookies at the kitchen table.

"Have some fruit from the bowl," she said to Joseph.

"Thanks," he mumbled as he bit into a peach. "Good." He took another one from the bowl and held it out to Mitchell.

Mitchell paled and shook his head. "I can't eat peaches."

"Why?"

"Just the smell makes my stomach hurt. I HATE peaches."

"Well, take an apple then," snapped Noreen. She never understood why it felt as though Mitchell's allergy was her fault.

■
Shonogo offered his treasure to the poor man.

The peasant shouted, "Life is but illusion!" and tore off his disguise. The deceptive Ninja threw his star.

Shonogo was prepared. He sliced down with his sword, deflecting the star, push-kicked the Ninja, then ended his miserable life.

"Mitchell! Are you playing that awful game again? Give it to me," demanded Noreen.

"But, it helps me focus."

"I told you not to play this game so much. Every time I turn around, you're at it. Hand it over."

"Yes, Mamasan."

"I told you not to say that. Can't you ever be an obedient son?"

"Yes, mother." Mitchell bowed and went to his room. Noreen watched his erect walk. She took a pair of scissors, snipped the disk into pieces and threw it into the trash. Her hands shook. Quietly, she went to Mitchell's room and peered through the partially opened door.

Mitchell stood in front of a small red plasticine figure on his otherwise empty dresser top. The clay was finely sculpted into a plump man wearing a topknot and sitting in the lotus position.

He spoke to the figure. "I am of two faces. One, of the jeans, and one of the belt. Which is real?"

Noreen felt cold prickles traveling up her spine.

"Mamasan does not understand. She lives in the small mind, as she did before—"

"Mitchell."

"Yes."

"Maybe it would be better if you went to play outside."

Mitchell turned and looked into

her eyes. They seemed so very old.

"Go on," said Noreen.

After Mitchell left, Noreen crushed the plasticine man. She rolled the clay around and around, squeezing and rubbing it smooth. She shoved the plasticine into the ice cream bucket in the bottom of the closet and shut the door. She soaped her hands over and over, trying to rid them of the oily feeling.

"Look, Mom."

Noreen jumped. Mitchell was standing in the doorway with a small bunch of pink bleeding hearts in his hands.

"I found them growing by the fence. Can I have a vase?"

"I'll get it."

He plucked off the leaves until there were only two left.

"That's awfully bare," Noreen said.

"I like it," said Mitchell as he arranged them. The flowers looked starkly balanced as he carried them into his room. A moment later, Noreen heard the closet door open and the peeling sound of the lid of the ice cream bucket.

•

The next week Noreen decided to meet Mitchell after school. She'd had the strangest dream. Mitchell was dressed as a Samurai. She'd torn the gown from his body, striking him over and over as she did. She needed to see him in his Rough Rider jeans and Blue Bomber jacket.

She walked on the opposite side of the street from McCormick's. The dog was barking so loudly, she didn't hear the shouting boys until she saw them.

Joseph was sitting on the ground, his face smeared with blood. Four boys circled Mitchell, kicking and punching.

"Should have minded your own business, Leland," yelled the largest boy.

"I'm warning you, Ricky!"

The big boy laughed and kicked at Joseph. Mitchell moved in a blur and Ricky crashed into the pavement. Mitchell spun and axe-kicked another child in the stomach, whirled again and reverse punched the third boy in the jaw. He grabbed the arm of a boy in a Montreal Canadiens sweatshirt and forced him to the ground. Ricky attacked from behind. There was a loud snap and the Montreal Canadiens fan screamed. Noreen reached the group.

"Stop!" she screamed. "Stop this right now."

The boy holding his stomach whimpered and stumbled away. The one Mitchell had punched in the jaw ran, Nikes slapping.

Ricky hissed to Joseph, "We're not finished with you yet."

"Take your brother and get out of here," said Mitchell.

Ricky glared.

"Do it," ordered Noreen. "Mitchell's father and I will be talking to your parents."

They took Joseph home. His mother thanked them and took him quickly inside. After Mitchell had cleaned up, Noreen questioned him in the kitchen.

"They were beating on Joseph," said Mitchell. "For no good reason. I must protect all those who are weaker than myself."

"What?"

"It was four to one."

"I just hate to see you fighting."

"Is that why you never come to my karate classes?" said Mitchell, his eyes narrowing. "Not even the tournaments."

Noreen was relieved when Alex arrived home then, interrupting the uncomfortable conversation.

•

The Samurai was ready. Their peasant disguises would not fool him again. When the third Ninja jumped from behind the tree, Shonogo did not hesitate. Soon, the bodies of the three cowards lay scattered on the path.

He drew his sword when the next peasant approached. In terror, the poor man dropped his possessions and fled. Shonogo was ashamed. He had attacked an innocent man. He fell to his knees.

"I have lost face," he cried, "my karma is a stone on my heart." He plunged his sword into his stomach. The funeral music sounded.

Shonogo began his second life, stronger and wiser. This time he would succeed.

"Where did you get this game?" demanded Noreen.

"I had a backup," said Mitchell.

"Give it to me, and any others you have as well."

"Please, I need it."

"Don't be ridiculous. No one needs a silly computer game."

"Why does it bother you, Mamasan?"

"Mom!"

"Sorry."

"You drive me crazy with this Jap stuff."

"You sound like those bullies. Now Japanese is bad?"

"Of course not!" she shouted, then paused, took a deep breath and lowered her voice. "You are not Japanese. You are not a warrior or...or anything. You're a WASP, for God's sake."

"Illusion," said Mitchell.

"You don't even know what that means."

"Neither do you."

"Stop parroting this nonsense. You are Mitchell Leland, my eleven year old son, an ordinary boy, and you will behave in the way I feel is appropriate. You will obey me."

"This time I must find my own way."

Noreen grabbed his shoulders and shook him. "Shut up. You're talking like a crazy person. I am your mother. You will do as I say! I SAY!"

"Why don't you just feed me some peaches?"

Smack! Noreen's slap left an imprint on his pale cheek. She stepped back, horrified, then turned and ran into the bathroom to vomit.

■

Four days after the school yard fight, at 3:45 p.m., McCormick's pitbull broke his chain. He headed straight for Leland's yard where Mitchell and Joseph were perusing comics on the front step.

The Samurai heard the dragon before he saw it. He had only his travelling bag for a weapon, but he did not hesitate.

Noreen couldn't believe Joseph could shriek like that. He was on the sidewalk between the dog's front paws. Its jaw was lathered in foam

and blood. Noreen yanked the cupboard drawer so hard, its contents crashed to the floor. She grabbed the bread knife and tore out the door.

"Get him to safety," shouted the Samurai as he leapt onto the dragon's back and clenched the strap of his travelling bag into its throat.

Noreen pulled Joseph to the side, then plunged the knife into the pit bull's stubby neck, once, twice, the blade clanking on thick bone. Joseph lay on the grass, whimpering. The dog collapsed.

"I'm all right," said Mitchell. "Joseph's bleeding bad."

Noreen flinched at the sight of the child's torn arm.

"You saved him," whispered Noreen.

"I was meant to."

Noreen bit her lip. "I'm sorry I never came to see your tournaments." She shook her head, as if to clear her cluttered thoughts, then helped Joseph indoors.

"She understands," said the samurai. "This time, perhaps she will allow me to be who I must be."

He smiled widely, releasing his grip on the dragon. He would speak with his honoured mother. She would grow to love him as he was. There would be no peaches in their future.

The dragon sensed the samurai's distraction. He lunged.

■

"It's not your fault," said Alex. No one would have suspected the dog could rally."

Alex stroked Noreen's hair as she sobbed against his shoulder in the hospital bereavement room.

"How could such a little boy have such courage?" whispered

Noreen.

Noreen kept Mitchell's room virtually unchanged after his death. Alex did not feel this was healthy for either of them, but he tread softly. Noreen had terrible recurring nightmares.

She dreamt herself screaming at Mitchell, insisting that he join her brother in the family pottery business. Odd, since she had no brother.

Mitchell shook his head. "I must follow my own path."

She slapped him, hard, over and over. "You will not disobey me. You will not become the Shogun's pawn. You will not throw away the life I gave you for strangers." She yanked his hair. "You will stay with your family and care for us in our old age. You are the only son. I will kill you before I let you desert us. I will kill you and bury you in the garden where only the worms will know."

Sometimes she woke to the smell of peaches, strangely underlaid with a chemical scent.

She spent more time in Mitchell's room, trying to solve the puzzles of his life.

"I know you think I'm stuck in the denial stage," said Noreen when Alex tried to discard the plasticine figure. "Maybe I am, but I just can't bear to throw out his things. Would it be alright if I just packed them in boxes? Could we keep them in the basement?"

"I'll help you pack them," said Alex.

Less than a year later, Alex came home to find Noreen going through the boxes. His brow creased.

"Don't worry," said Noreen. "I'm just looking for his wall-hanging. I thought it might be nice for the nurs-

ery."

Alex's eyes widened as Noreen smiled hesitantly. He hugged her tightly. "Perhaps a daughter this time. Someone you can be close to."

"No matter. Whoever it is, I will try so hard, so very hard, to love them just as they are."

•

The Leland baby's first cries rang through the maternity ward like a gong. Alex's work took him out of town more often. The pregnancy and birth had been very difficult. The only solution was a nanny. Alex obtained a name from a business acquaintance.

"Mrs. Schmidt seems just what we're looking for," he told Noreen. Alex greeted Mrs. Schmidt at the door, while Noreen tried to calm the baby upstairs.

Noreen paced, jiggled and made soothing noises. "You'll scare her off, darling."

The red-face squalling continued. She could hear her husband's voice faintly, but not the nanny's. Her head pounded, but she was determined to be patient. A moment later, Alex opened the door.

"She wants to see the baby. She seems very quiet and calm."

"How will she cope with this little beast?"

"Let's find out." Alex took the baby.

As Noreen washed her hands, she listened. She could hear her husband's voice occasionally and a different soft, singsong voice. No crying.

Noreen paused at the living room entrance. Mrs. Schmidt bent over the baby, humming softly. She was a small woman with dark hair. Noreen strode across the room.

"How do you do? I'm Noreen Leland."

"So happy to meet you," responded Mrs. Schmidt in a heavy Japanese accent.

Noreen was startled by the depth of the woman's Oriental brown eyes.

"Mrs. Schmidt. That's a German name, isn't it?"

"*So desu*," nodded the nanny. "My husband was German, but I am from Kyoto."

"I hope you can handle a colicky baby," said Noreen. "He seems as though he was born with a stomach ache."

"This too will change. All things change. Nothing is permanent."

Noreen smiled, strangely comforted by this remark.

•

Noreen pauses at the sand-filled flower bed. She has decided to keep it as a rock garden. Its serenity cures headaches. Sometimes she sits here and considers the advice Obachan, as they call Mrs. Schmidt, offers in small doses. One that is difficult to achieve is the goal of right effort, "to direct our efforts incessantly to the overcoming of ignorance and selfish desires."

The wind has altered the rake lines into less rigid patterns, but still there is order to the waves. She thinks of Mitchell. His memory, like the waves, seems softer. Somehow, they balance. It is the law of impermanence that intrigues Noreen most, offering both despair and freedom.

She gathers the half-wild bleeding hearts that grow through the fence, plucks off most of the leaves, and brings them into her workroom. She gathers her painting materials.

Noreen poises the brush above

the canvas. The shading isn't right. She walks to the table and turns the vase, examining the flower shadows on the cherry wood surface. She nods, satisfied and returns to the easel. All her landscapes and floral arrangements now hold healthy, balanced flowers. Thomas enters.

"I like that," he announces in his bright childish voice.

Noreen smiles. "Do you want to paint, Son?"

Thomas nods. Noreen picks up a peach beside her easel and bites into it. Thomas shudders as the juice trickles down her skin. She wipes her chin and lays the peach on the table. Thomas stares at it for a moment, lips pressed tightly together, then turns away.

"What will you paint today?" asks Noreen.

"I don't know."

"How about a kitty? Or a puppy?"

"I HATE dogs," announces Thomas.

Noreen looks at his serious expression. She wonders if she has let something slip.

"Some dogs are nice. I had a poodle when I was a little girl. He was sweet."

"Okay. I won't hate poodles, but I still hate mean dogs."

"That's your choice, honey. You can decide."

"Can I?" asks Thomas.

"What?"

"Decide things for myself."

"Sure, unless you're too little."

"When I grow up?"

"Of course."

Thomas smiles; his gappy grin tugs at her heart.

"Here," she says passing him a brush. "Make your picture." She clips a large sheet of paper on a small easel. She is amazed at how quiet Thomas is when he paints. The mess doesn't bother her. Mrs. Schmidt will scrub away any stains Noreen misses. She had considered letting Mrs. Schmidt go once he reached school age, but knew she would miss the woman as much as Thomas, for many reasons.

"Want some red paint?" she asks.

"No, yellow. Yellow is my favourite colour."

Noreen returns to her still life. She'll have no trouble selling this watercolour. The gallery has been pressuring her for more. They sell as fast as she can create them.

Thomas dips his brush. He carefully draws a J and a box, followed by two hammock shaped lines, a hook and a tent down the page. Noreen immerses herself in the shadow of a petal. Thomas finishes off his page with a flourish of yellow waves around the border of the paper.

"I'm done," he announces. "I made a story."

"Did you? Leave it there to dry and you can read it to Daddy and me at supper."

Thomas nods. Noreen goes to the sink and rinses her brush. The splashing water veils Thomas' small voice as he reads aloud. He follows the golden lines arranged into calligraphic figures down the page.

"Daddy goes to work. Thomas gets big. He grows up. He is smart. He is good. He can walk his own path. Mamasan learns." •

THE STICKMAN TRIAL

by Jocko

More evidence today in the case of Noah Strickland—
The man who deprived his child of TV for the first
Ten years of the child's life. The most damaging
Testimony in the case came from Strickland's
Son himself in the form of the art class video
That first made Daniel Strickland's teachers suspicious.
The video—drawing on poor production values
In lighting, editing and picture quality—is an animated
Short portraying a day in the life of a stickman...
Ironically illustrating Daniel's inability
To create striking, comprehensible visual imagery.
The prosecuting attorney, Gable Presley, presented expert
Testimony from two video teachers who swore under oath
That the various scenes in which the stickman
Is pushed aside or trampled into little dashes on a sidewalk
And a partly edited scene showing the stickman's
Hands and feet bleeding as he passes through a graveyard
Of tombstones that resemble TV antennae (the only instance
Of colour in the entire video) show the violent tendencies
Particularly associated with children who have undergone
Severe visual deprivation. The final scene—
With the stickman sitting Buddha-like, antennae on his head,
In front of a TV on a three-legged table—
Was, one psychologist said, evidence of a deep-seated
Longing for belonging or, technically, a Be-longing.
This final scene, shown here, gradually lightens
To the point where all the lines of the stickman can finally
Not be seen at all—a telling example of a poor
Video education, experts agree.

The Stickman trial resumes tomorrow. •



THERAPY

by Kate Riedel

illustrated by Kenneth Scott

Dianne was in front of the mirror holding a 1930s bias-cut blue velvet hostess gown against herself when she became aware of the dialogue at the counter.

"No, I can't do it," she heard Melanie say.

"I can let you have it for only a hundred dollars," the male voice replied.

"No. Sorry. I don't buy furs."

"Seventy-five? Fifty? You could get two hundred for it easy..."

"No way, not even for fifty cents. The last time I had a rack of fur coats the animal rights people dumped red paint all over them. It isn't worth the hassle. Try the furriers, they can take the heat."

"But..."

"No! You're wasting both our time."

Melanie usually didn't lose her temper; everyone was a potential customer. Dianne turned to see who could have driven Melanie so close to the edge.

It was a young man, maybe mid-twenties, neatly dressed in tan slacks that looked familiar somehow, topped with a pea jacket. He was shoving a full-length fur coat into a black garbage bag with total disregard for the lay of the thick copper-bright hairs. Dianne suppressed a shiver as she watched. He slammed out the door, leaving the brass bells jangling.

"Was that true, about the red paint?" asked Dianne.

"Damn right. Self-righteous little buggers. Gone before I could get a good look at them or call the cops. And it wasn't as if there was a thing on the rack that wasn't dead fifty years ago. One of the paint-slingers wore a leather jacket, I wish I'd had a chance to ask how he thought the cow felt. But I turned this guy down because I don't take stolen goods."

"How do you know it was stolen?"

"You learn to recognize the signs in this business, and he was nervous about something for sure."

"I'd have paid him fifty dollars if you'd given me the chance. I need a winter coat."

"Honey, you don't want to get mixed up in stolen goods. Or fur. You know they spit on you when you walk down the street? What have you got there?"

Dianne held up the blue gown.

"Nice. Good colour for you. For anything in particular?"

"My boyfriend's staff Christmas party."

"Hey, have I got something for you..."

By the time Dianne left the store she had put down a small fortune on a black beaded flapper dress and a promise from Melanie to replace some missing beads. "You will be absolutely the sexiest thing at the party. Your boyfriend sees you in that you may never get to the party," Melanie added with a cheerful leer.

And that, Dianne thought, was the whole point. Maybe this one would work. Not for Pete, for her.

She took a shortcut through the parking lot behind Melanie's and the second-hand office furniture store next door. The dumpster behind the store was overflowing. Broken steno chairs, desk drawers, a bent metal filing cabinet shell lay on the ground. Backless and seatless chair frames stuck up over the edge of the dumpster like dying aluminum spiders. One of them clutched a black garbage bag.

Her reaching fingers brought the bag tumbling off the dumpster, not

without a shudder as the plastic brushed her face, spilling the surprisingly light silky folds of the copper-bright fur coat around her. She wrapped her arms around it before it could slide down into the dirty snow of the parking lot.

She really did need a new winter coat, and she couldn't afford one, unemployed over a year now. So she couldn't afford the dress either, that was different. Pete had offered to buy her a new coat, but...

Pete. How would she explain this to Pete? He'd know she couldn't afford a coat like this, and he'd never believe she had just *found* it. She'd just tell him about Melanie and the young man, and then add, "Well, I could afford fifty dollars." That wouldn't exactly be lying. And it wasn't receiving stolen goods if you *found* something, was it? She flung the coat around her shoulders, right over her shabby wool jacket, and headed for the streetcar stop.

At home in the third-floor apartment she hung the coat carefully on a wooden hanger and went to the kitchen to start supper. If Pete was paying the rent the least she could do was make like a housewife.

Maybe she shouldn't have bought the dress. But what if it worked? The peach satin negligee had *almost* worked. So had the embroidered silk kimono. Almost. If only she could create an artificial enough, *civilized* enough atmosphere... Okay, so maybe Melanie's Memories of Queen Street West hadn't worked, but it had come a lot closer than that damned so-called support group or that double-damned

therapist. Dianne could still see the look on that doctor's face when she had said to him, just before walking out for the last time, "Do you realize that if you divide 'therapist' in the right place it comes out 'the rapist?' "

But the present problem was, how would she explain that coat to Pete?

It turned out to be easier than she'd thought; Pete was full of his own windfall. "Tickets to the ballet! Marcy's husband is down with the flu and she doesn't like to go alone, and she knows you love ballet..."

It was the perfect opportunity to show the coat. "I can wear it tonight! What ballet is it?"

"*Swan Lake*, no less. Daaah, da-da-da-da-dah, da-daaah." He executed a clumsy arabesque.

"A dying swan you're not."

"Critics!" Pete sighed melodramatically as he took off his tie.

"It was nice of Marcy to remember I like ballet," said Dianne as she hung the coat back in the closet.

"A lot of people at the library are concerned about you, you know, want to know how you're doing..."

"Sweet of them," she said viciously. Just for a minute she'd had an urge to throw herself into Pete's arms, topple him back on the bed, laughing, the way they'd used to, and the hell with supper. She knew Pete had seen the impulse in her eyes, and seen it fade, and it only made things worse.

"Sweetheart..." he said, but she ignored him and went to the kitchen to take the casserole out of the oven. She knew the words that would follow—"It's all right..." But it wasn't.

"We'll have to hurry if we're going to get to the ballet on time," she said.

Actually they had plenty of time.

At intermission Pete stood in line at the bar and then pushed his way back through the crowd to her, holding the plastic glasses of white wine above his head.

"What did it cost you?" she asked. "As much as the tickets would have?"

"Not quite. Drink up, enjoy. What do you think of it so far?"

"Siegfried's mama isn't going to be happy. What I want to know is, why is it always women who get changed into swans or whatever?"

"Oh, probably some out-of-work magician gets bored and says to himself, 'I think I'll turn a princess into a swan, just to keep my hand in.' But it's not always women. The swans in the Hans Christian Anderson story were princes. And selkies are often male, but they're seals first and men second, usually when a female human catches their fancy. Female selkies get the short end of the stick and end up keeping house for any fisherman who can grab their seal skin. And hide it. As long as she can't find her seal skin, she's stuck with him. Why he always just hides it and doesn't burn it I don't know. We men aren't too bright, I guess."

"Then how do you know so much about selkies?"

"Some little teeny-bopper was in the library today asking about Scottish folklore."

"Another one convinced she's the only one ever to discover the Celts?"

"You got it."

"So did it say why female selkies bother turning into women in the first place?"

"As far as I could find out no-one's ever bothered to explain that in any of the animal-wife stories. They just feel sorry for some poor slob, or maybe want to try some kinky sex, and end up barefoot, pregnant and in the..."

"My God!" Dianne interrupted.

"What?"

"There's the guy who brought the coat in to Melanie's!" She pointed across the lobby. "There. The one with the woman with the red hair."

The young woman was so thin that Dianne wondered at first if she was anorexic, then thought, maybe high metabolism. Even standing still she was alert, ready to move. She was built like a model, but didn't carry herself like one. Her clothes hung awkwardly on her nervous body. Her thick carrot-coloured hair was cut shaggy, short and layered, setting off her pointed face.

"Want to go say hello?" asked Pete.

"Nope," said Dianne hastily. "I'd be embarrassed." How embarrassed she hoped Pete would never know.

Why, she wondered, had the young man been so anxious to sell the coat? If he could afford tickets to the ballet you wouldn't think he'd need the money, although of course his tickets could have been a wind-fall, just like theirs.

And the coat would have been perfect on that girlfriend of his...well, maybe she was into animal rights. Maybe he'd bought it for her and

she'd refused to wear it. You could tell he'd cater to her every whim; he reminded Dianne of a puppy at the feet of a beloved but unpredictable mistress. "He's head-over-heels in love with her," Dianne observed.

"That may be," said Pete, "but she's terrified of him."

"Oh, come on," said Dianne. "Impatient with him, maybe, he *does* hover. But terrified? How can you tell?"

"I've learned to recognize the look," said Pete, and then Dianne felt him stiffen as he realized what he'd said. She reached for his hand. He accepted the tightening of her fingers as her acknowledgement of his unspoken apology. They finished their wine and returned to their seats.

■

As they left the theatre Dianne reached into her purse for her transit pass. A piece of tissue came out with it and fell to the sidewalk. She turned back to pick it up, but someone behind her had already picked it up—the young woman with the nervous body and spiky red hair. Neatness freak, thought Dianne. Bound to be part of the animal rights movement. No wonder he had to get rid of the coat.

■

The fur of the coat brushed against her bare arm as she returned it to the closet at home, and just for a moment she felt a whisper of the earlier feeling. But by the time Pete had finished his bath she was curled into a fetal position on her side of the bed, facing away from him. She didn't move when he put his arm around her.

"Just being friendly," he murmured.

"I know."

Eventually he took his arm away, rolled over, and, as far as she could tell, went to sleep.

What would have happened, Dianne wondered, if she had responded, rolled over into his arms, opened herself to him?

Stupid question. She knew what would happen. The second he penetrated her she would scream. And scream, and scream...

The way she would have that night, if she had been able to. The night she stepped out into the archway, ready to lock up the library branch, noting that the overhead light wasn't flickering any more, it was gone totally... And as she reached for her keys the garbage bag had gone over her head and she couldn't scream because the black plastic of the bag was shoved into her mouth... The police told her she was lucky to be alive. She believed them. His last three victims weren't.

"Damn dog," said Pete the next morning. "I thought I'd never get to sleep."

Dianne didn't remember hearing any dog.

"High-pitched yapping. Kept me awake for hours. I'm a wreck. By the way, are you going to do my Christmas shopping today?"

"Anything to keep you from terrorizing the sales clerks."

"What about the Christmas party, do you have something to wear?"

"Bought something yesterday, at

Melanie's."

"Hey, I would have paid for that..."

"I can still pay my own way."

"Take it easy, take it easy, I know, okay? By the way, I saw an ad for a job the other day..."

"I'm looking for a job. You don't have to do my job hunting for me."

"Don't be so touchy, I just thought you'd like to know."

"Sorry. What was it?"

"Some insurance company is looking for a librarian. You've got all the qualifications."

"It's not the same. Would you work for an insurance company after working in a public library?"

"Like a shot!" He kissed her on the cheek. "Gotta run, see you tonight, have fun shopping."

•

As she stepped out the door a flicker of movement under the bushes by the front porch caught her eye. A small black dog backed itself against the foundation of the house, bared needle-sharp teeth in a snarl, then whipped around and ran. She wondered if it was the dog that had kept Pete awake last night.

The ceramic studio on Queen East first, she decided as she waited for the streetcar, then maybe the Ontario Crafts Guild shop. She wanted to find something special for Pete's mother and sister. They had both been very kind to her. And since her contribution was going to be the selection...

She'd always paid her own way. And she'd had to fight—fight herself, more than anyone else—to do it. As an indulged youngest child she had

learned early how easy it was to let people do things for her. She had applied to the University of Toronto library school because it was a long way from home, and a long way from being the baby of the family. She had worked for temp agencies to pay her way through graduate school. She had worked hard and paid her dues, and loved her job with the passion of a crusader.

•

"Are you sure you don't want me to come with you?" Pete had asked, her first Monday back to work after getting out of the hospital.

No one could have been more supportive than Pete. He had simply, literally, but unobtrusively moved in. Not to stay, at first. Not until he saw the barriers closing down. As long as he stayed she could never close them down completely.

"No. I have to do it by myself."

And she'd done it. She'd walked into the library, endured the sudden distance of the rest of the staff, their sympathy mixed with something that felt like fear, their obvious uncertainty about how to treat her. Everyone said how glad they were to have her back, but were very careful to avoid talking about why she had been gone, as if, once mentioned, what had happened to her might happen to them.

She'd lasted a whole week. On Friday she dropped her letter of resignation into the inter-branch courier box and walked out the door, forcing herself to walk, not run, and had never gone back.

"Apply for victim's comp," the officer in charge of the investigation

told her. But, they told her at the victim's compensation office, it would have been so much easier if he *hadn't* been caught, now they'd have to wait until the trial was over. And then it was, "we have an enormous backlog..." and finally, "Ms. Dianne Yager was obviously able to continue her employment, her resignation was voluntary, medical records indicate no permanent physical damage..."

And here she was, once again in a state of infantile dependency, even if it was just with Pete...

•

As Dianne came out of the pottery studio the woman looking in the window turned and walked quickly away, but not before Dianne recognized the angular body and shaggy red hair.

•

As she came out of the Crafts Guild shop she felt herself being jostled. Then she heard—or did she just *think* she heard?—"Get those dead animals off your back." Dianne turned. There were several people on the street, but the one she focused on was the woman with the spiky red hair disappearing down the alley.

At the University of Toronto Bookstore she found the book she wanted for Pete's present and headed for the counter, then noticed a book of Japanese prints. Erotic prints—she remembered going through a similar book, laughing at the exaggerated genitalia juxtaposed with the formally drawn robes and faces—laughable, she remembered, but also effective. She opened the book at random, to an energetic coupling in which the men seemed totally oblivious to the

fact that the women were turning into foxes. The foxes looked like they were enjoying a good joke.

She leafed the rest of the book; was amused, but not aroused. She paid for Pete's book with her own money, then went down the steps to the street corner and caught the College streetcar west.

She had seen the streetcar operator twice before. Now that he had on the regulation maroon winter jacket, she recognized the tan slacks he'd worn into Melanie's as part of the TTC uniform. As she took the last single seat he leaned around to look at her. Or at the coat. The light turned green and he turned back and set the streetcar moving forward.

I don't need to feel guilty, Dianne told herself. I didn't steal it, and he *did* throw it away. Besides, how can he know it's the same one? A lot of fur coats look alike.

The woman with the shaggy red hair got on at Spadina. Peering between the boarding passengers, Dianne saw the woman and the operator exchange greetings, saw the woman looking at her. The streetcar filled up at Bathurst, and the crowd of passengers standing in the aisle blocked Dianne's view completely.

Dianne and the woman were the only passengers on the streetcar as it pulled into the High Park loop. Dianne got out at the centre doors. The woman got out at the front. She looked at first as if she were about to approach Dianne, but Dianne deliberately walked around behind the streetcar. She could feel, rather than see, the woman turn away and cross the road to look down into the ravine

where the pines were dark against the snow and the buildings along Bloor Street to the north rose inconspicuously above the bare branches of the oaks.

Dianne paused to look back. The operator had got down from the car and walked across to where the woman stood looking down into the ravine. The woman's attention was focused on the ravine, his on her. Her face was contorted, but there were no tears. They spoke quietly, intensely. Dianne couldn't see the operator's face. He put his arm around the woman; she flinched away. He withdrew his arm and turned back to the streetcar; the pain on his face left Dianne embarrassed and ashamed at having seen it.

•

The sun was bright, but the air was cold. The snow gleamed where it had melted and refrozen, imprisoning old stalks of goldenrod, some with grey pappi still clinging to the tattered old flowerheads. There was an occasional jogger or dog-walker, even on a cold day in the middle of the week in the middle of winter, but they passed on the other side of the road.

•

People were surprised when they found out she still walked in High Park; wasn't she afraid?

No, she wasn't. Her fears didn't live in the park. The women in the support group she had briefly attended would probably have something to say about that. They'd had plenty to say about her being one of the 40 or so percent raped by someone she didn't know. Almost as if she

should feel guilty about it—and she *did* feel guilty.

“All men are capable of rape,” said one woman in the support group, the one who pasted up flyers on hoardings and bus shelters, flyers that read:

your
father, brother, son, uncle, grandfa-
ther, boyfriend
RAPED, MURDERED,
ASSAULTED
my
mother, sister, daughter, aunt,
grandmother, girlfriend.

But Dianne refuse to believe it. She refused to equate her father, who had encouraged her in her independence, with the West End Rapist. Or Pete with the majority whose victims were known to them. Or the investigating officer, who had stood by her during the worst part of the trial, with the men who said she didn't really mean no.

“Well, of course the police were supportive of *you*,” said the woman with the flyers. “*You* were a victim of the famous West End Rapist. Try going to the police and telling them your ex-boyfriend raped you, and see how much support you get.”

And it was true, of course, and she resented it. Resentment didn't help, any more than the people she resented could help. She was the only one who could say “I won't let that bastard win” and make it stick. But he had won, so far.

She turned aside to the creek. It

was iced over here; further down she could hear mallards on a patch of open water. A chickadee swung on a branch of the cluster of saplings at the foot of the slope across the creek, then flew away. The small black dog she had seen that morning slipped between the trunks of the saplings. It paused, one paw up, nose lifted, sniffing warily. Its bushy black tail ended in a full white tip. She wondered where its owner was. It vanished into the brush as quickly as it had appeared. Dianne turned toward home.

She put her parcels down on the table, took off the coat and draped it over a chair. I wonder, she thought suddenly, and went to the bookshelves for the *Canadian Encyclopedia* and looked up “fox.”

“Red foxes are the largest,” she read, “and may be reddish with a ‘cross’ on the back or, rarely, black, or may have silver-tipped hairs... Common in farming or wooded areas...they breed in Jan-Feb...” Rarely black. Could the animal she had seen in the park have been a fox, rather than a dog? High Park was certainly a wooded area.

She went to the bedroom to change her clothes, and was down to her underwear when she remembered the coat still on the chair. She went to get it, to hang it up, and as the fur touched her skin all of her senses suddenly heightened. She stood by the chair, aroused, alert. She could hear Pete's step on the porch downstairs before he even put his key in the lock, the wariness in his step as he climbed the stairs to

the third floor apartment—he's never sure what he'll find, she realized, but he always has that under control by the time he reaches the door—*smell* the relief as he opened the door and saw the parcels on the table. She ducked into the bedroom to pull on her jeans and shirt and hang up the coat. Had he felt whatever it was too? All he said was, "I brought home that job ad. How'd the shopping go?"

•

The rest of the week Dianne felt watched, whether shopping, dutifully posting her resume to the insurance company, or making the rounds of the employment agencies on her own before Pete took it into his head to suggest *that*. She was certain enough that occasionally she would turn quickly to try to take whoever it was by surprise. But she never saw anyone.

She wore her old wool jacket when she went back to Melanie's to pick up the dress. The shop was empty of customers. Melanie proudly displayed the lovingly mended bead work—"period beads, love, French jet, not that plastic crap they use now. Try it on again..."

Behind the antique screens that served as a dressing room Dianne heard the brass bells over the door jangle and then Melanie saying,

"Can I help you? Oh, sorry love, can you leave the little dog outside, please?"

A black nose poked under the screen, disappeared as quickly as it had appeared, and the bells jangled again.

"Let's see how it looks. Lovely! Perfect, if I say so myself!"

Dianne turned about in front of the mirror, watching the fringes move. "Some woman brought her dog in?" she asked.

"Yes, and not even on a leash. Cute little thing, lovely glossy fur, must take better care of it than she does of herself. Her hair could have used a good wash and she was a case of anorexia if I ever saw it. That's absolutely gorgeous on you love. Now keep it in this box, put beaded clothes on hangers and it weakens the fabric. This is a real collector's item, so tell that young man of yours he's to take it off you *carefully*, not rip it off!"

As Dianne left the store she looked for the woman with her dog, but didn't see her. She caught the Queen streetcar going west. Two stops later the woman got on, alone.

When Dianne had first seen her the woman had appeared thin, but not unnaturally so. Now she looked haggard, bones too close to the surface, eyes sunken, the shaggy hair limp, almost matted. She moved down the aisle, eyes on Dianne, paused beside her, then moved on toward the back of the streetcar.

Dianne carefully kept her eyes forward. Nor did she look behind her as she got off the streetcar. But as she turned onto her street she felt a hand on her elbow. Light as the touch was she could feel the too-thin, bony fingers right through the wool of the jacket. She knew, even before she turned, that she would be looking into the too-bright eyes of the shaggy-haired woman. Dianne broke loose and fled for her front door.

Safe in the upstairs apartment,

Dianne looked out the window. Below her, the woman walked down the steps of the porch and away.

She would not think about that crazy woman out on the street, whatever her problem was. She had enough to worry about with the party tonight. She went to run a bath. She had to be ready for the party when Pete got home.

Pete had told her she didn't have to go.

"You'll have to go anyway," she pointed out, not adding that if he went without her she would have to stay home alone. "And I need to go."

"To prove?"

"Any number of things." If she didn't go everyone would know the reason why and they would all feel sorry for her and sorrier for Pete.

She pulled herself out of the tub, dried, and, wrapped in the silk kimono, went back to the bedroom.

The coat lay where she had left it on the bed. On impulse she slid out of the kimono, picked up the coat, and put it on.

The lining appeared to be very fine leather, like kidskin but absolutely seamless, smooth. And more erotic than the silk of the kimono. It brushed against her pubic hair, raised her nipples like a lover's hand. Once again she was aware of Pete's step on the porch before she could possibly have heard it.

This time she made no move, no effort to get away. When he walked in the bedroom door she was ready for him, her fingers on the buttons of his shirt almost as their lips met. He didn't ask questions, and he certainly didn't protest.

•
"We're late," said Dianne with a grin as they stepped off the elevator. "Sorry about that."

"I'm not," Pete grinned back. "Anyway, it's gauche to be early."

Heather DiMannos was standing by the coat check counter. "At least I'll get the worst over with right away," Dianne muttered.

"Courage, love," Pete muttered back. "You realize she applied for your job the minute your resignation hit the personnel office? She didn't get it."

Heather had applied for that job before, and hadn't got it then either. Dianne had.

"Fur, dear?" said Heather, looking the coat up and down. "Hardly couth."

"But very warm," said Dianne. "Nice to have on a night like tonight."

"I imagine that's what the fox thought too."

"Oh, is it fox? I didn't know. How did you learn so much about furs?"

Pete steered Dianne away from Heather and toward the hors d'oeuvres table, then went to buy drink tickets.

"I never did thank you for the ballet tickets," she said to Marcy, who was loading a plate with brie and crackers.

"Glad you could enjoy it, I think my so-called better half got sick on purpose. Love your dress, the real thing?"

"Absolutely. Too costume-y?"

"Not at all, it's perfect on you. And you're looking marvellous too."

I'm glad you're here, I wanted to tell you there's an opening in acquisitions—just came up today, not even posted yet. Interested?"

"Maybe." It would be public library work, but different enough from what she had been doing...not frontline... "Yes. Yes, I am."

"Good. Call 'em for details. I think you have a chance. Pete, my boy, haven't seen you for at least three hours. And how did you enjoy the ballet?"

•
"That wasn't so bad, was it?" said Pete as they waited in the midnight cold for the College streetcar going west.

"Not too bad," she agreed, jiggling a little on her toes. The coat was warm, but her boots weren't proof against the bitter cold and her feet were beginning to feel numb. "How can you stand this cold, with just shoes?"

"Actually my toes are falling off but I'm too macho to admit it. Here comes the streetcar."

As they took their seats a shadow solidified in the doorway behind where they had been standing and hurried to the streetcar, climbing in just before the light changed.

"Hey, look," said Pete. "Isn't that the woman we saw at the ballet? She looks sick, or something, but I'm sure it's her."

"It is," said Dianne. "Did you notice the driver?"

"What about him?"

"He's the guy she was with."

"Really?" He craned his neck, trying to see around the back of the streetcar operator's seat.

The car was only half full. The other passengers left, by ones and twos, at University, Spadina, Bathurst, Ossington, and few got on to replace them. As the car emptied, Dianne became more and more aware of the woman's eyes on her. Pete noticed too; she could tell by the almost imperceptible tightening of his arm around her shoulders.

By the time the car switched to Dundas it was empty except for themselves, the woman and the operator.

"Want to get off at Roncesvalles?" Pete asked.

"No. I want to ride through to the loop."

The streetcar ground to a halt on the loop. The operator stood up. Dianne let Pete lead her to the middle doors.

Across the road the glittering snow sloped away under the trees. They could see the lights of Bloor Street north above the trees, but looking west the stars were visible above High Park in spite of the city lights.

"Come on," said Pete, tugging at Dianne's elbow.

"Just a minute," said Dianne.

The woman emerged from the front door of the streetcar, the operator right behind her.

"What are you doing?" hissed Pete as Dianne moved toward them.

She shook free of his hand and took off the fur coat. The woman's eyes followed the movement of Dianne's hands, but otherwise she did not move. As the coat came off, her eyes moved up to meet Dianne's.

"What the hell," said Pete behind her. Dianne let the woman hold

her gaze a minute more. Had it been a night like tonight? Perhaps even right here? Bright stars, a handsome young man, desire like wine in the blood? Had she laughed as their bodies met, not realizing how complicated it was to be human, how dangerous... Dianne turned to the operator. He looked back, waiting. Prove I'm right, she thought. Goddamn you, prove I'm right.

She handed the coat to the operator.

In slow motion he turned to the woman. She kicked off her boots and stood barefoot in the snow; dropped her wool coat on the ground; pulled off the sweater and skirt that hung shapeless on her. She wore nothing underneath. The streetlight picked out every gaunt rib, the skeletal arms, the line of the pelvis where it strained against the skin.

The operator held up the coat.

The woman slid into it and was gone. On the snow-covered slope of the ravine the red fox was joined by the black one, and both disappeared into the shadows under the pines.

Without a word the streetcar operator got back on the car, closed the doors, started it up. Dianne watched it rattle around the loop and disappear under the bare trees that framed the street eastward. Only then did she feel the biting cold, hear the faint rattle of the beads on the fringes of the dress clicking against each other as she shivered.

Pete picked up the wool coat, shook the snow from it and wrapped it around Dianne.

"I don't think she'll be wanting it," he said, as they began the walk home. •

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AND
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Lotteries



**The Alberta
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Alberta
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

FATA MORGANA

by Catherine Girczyc

S miling lights on the water
Winking at us, transforming us
Into the stuff of myth.

Blue faking its way into my heart
And I laugh, realizing that this time
I am the Lady at the edge of the Lake
Not Guinevere at all, but the puissant
Misty One.

An anomaly in history
A woman helping a king
And a female Druid worshipping
Strange beauties in the night.

I grin, knowing that
I am changing the waves of time,
when I say to the young girl beside me:

*I will not be taking the Boat out today,
Put that sword back.
I have need of it.*

Arthur can save himself for once.

I have work to do. •



DIRECTOR'S CUT

by Wesley Herbert

illustrated by Robert Boerboom

Jacky didn't wake up any more, she just went to work. Making her go over the little details again and again. Putting the prod in until the feeling in her neck went numb. The way Dionne's teeth looked when she smiled. The way Jacky's wrist chafed from her coat in the heat. They asked too much and Jacky bled it all out like an IV drip. It was the little things that made history real enough to be believed. One more time holding it up, one more trip down that memory lane. The pulped together old newspaper and leaves in the gutter. Jacky had more of her life recorded on wire than she'd actually lived.

■

It's not real. Wire's too realistic to be real. Back 10 years ago when they switched from film to virtual realities recorded on wire, they took the next great step beyond motion pictures and television. Don't just watch things, be there.

●

The clock pattern read in the corner. 12:53:04. 12:53:05. 12:53:06. Jacky watched the main doors and backs of the tellers. A fishbowl view. Vertigo of hanging from the ceiling, monochrome eye in black and white. She kept trying to blink something out of her vision until it settled down as static from the video tape, bought from the bank's security company after the trial. 12:53:16, almost time. She tried to see when the clerk moves his coffee cup, because it won't be there when she comes in. The first security guard puts the pen back in its slot. Carefully chained to the table lest someone steal it. He moves to the window, on the edge of camera view. 12:53:21. Showtime.

The video Jacky pushes through the door and the realtime Jacky froze the frame. One foot hovered over the threshold. She tried to think, *What was going through my head?* So many times now, she's forgotten. Face set, one hand inside the pocket of the trench coat. Sunglasses flat black circles. Nothing behind those eyes to read. Not important. It's all on wire a dozen times already.

"We'd like an olfactory run-through here," the Sysop said. The frame released and her bootstep came down. No going back. The smell of the place came to her. That too-clean, plastic smell of fresh carpet. Sterile, air-conditioned.

A tiny whiff of her clothes reeking burned tobacco, obvious in the vacuum. In the grey picture, Dionne comes through the door with a pistol in each hand. Pauley behind her, angling towards the first security guard and missing the second. Wayne and Strat only dark outlines through the doors. Target silhouettes against the sun.

"That's fine," the Sysop said. The picture froze again. Jacky stares up at herself through the camera lens and into the future. The video Jacky doesn't know how the scene ends. Sometimes even the real Jacky forgets who's in realtime and who's on wire, involuntarily trying to stop herself before it's too late.

Jacky went over a preliminary edit of the bathroom scene. Followed herself into the restroom with the scrawled stall doors. DeGaul, the director, was a perspec genius. Big, big money on this wire epic. Jacky's stomach turned over. Knew what came next. She made herself keep her mind to the money, to the deal her lawyer had hammered out when this wire got released on satellite network. The wire reeled on.

Jacky stares at herself in the mirror. Turns a dirty knob and water splashes into the sink. Cold over her hands. She runs them through her short, black hair. Wets it back off her forehead and lifts her chin to the mirror. Then the left profile, then the right. She picks at the faded colour on her eyelid. Pulls the heavy bags under her eye with a finger. The perspec stays on her reflection in the mirror as she turns and goes into a stall. The skull and crossbones on the back of

her denim jacket in black marker are cut off by the closing door. The perspec shifts to the restroom door and two men come in. The first in a checked flannel shirt and black beard. The other younger, face a scab of acne scars, in a Harley Davidson T-shirt.

This is where it's all wrong, realtime Jacky thought. *This is where they changed what I remembered for them.* There'd been a third man. He was a cop.

Perspec back to Jacky as hands reach under the door and grab her ankles. Dark hair sprouting on the tan, thick knuckles. Dirt under the fingernails and a scab on the thumb. *Good job there,* the realtime Jacky thought. She hits her head falling off the toilet. Spatter of red, red blood on the porcelain and along the floor tile while they drag her out. Eyes wide and half stunned. Fear bucks her stomach, mouth open to scream, but the bearded one hits her across the face. He unbuckles his jeans. Perspec of him as he pulls her pants down and forces himself inside her. Slow fade-out on his hand over her mouth, tears running out of her eyes. Sonofabitch DeGaul. He wants shock value, stays on it longer than Jacky wants to see.

There are some things Hollywood just won't buy. In real life they'd handcuffed her and taken her away in the squad car. Jacky had kept trying to bleed on the upholstery and leave some kind of evidence. They locked her in an apartment, coming back every few hours to rape her again. All three of them. For three days until she got loose. She'd crept through the apartment, room by room

before anyone came back. Stole a nylon bag and filled it with some junk jewelry and clothes and moved into the kitchen. A little electric clock on the wall hummed. Cars on the road, three stories down, sped by. She'd put food and some beers into the bag when a key turned in the door lock and Jacky found the knife in her hand.

It was the cop, and she'd stabbed him in the back of his thick neck. He went down with the first blow. And the blood had come out. So much blood he just bled and bled and bled. Soaked into the mustard yellow carpet. She took his badge and gun and spare ammunition; that shiny, polished steel .357 magnum revolver. In the wire version DeGaul had invented, she bought the gun on the street and killed the cop with it. (He'd gone down in the line of duty.) She'd gone through the house one last time and when she came back he was still alive, dragging himself toward the telephone stand.

It'd all caught up with her then, all three days. She found her hands shaking, wished he'd just die. Her fingernails dug into the palms of her hands, and all the pain he'd done her vomited up. She went to the closet, and found the length of chain saw chain with electrical tape wrapped as a handle around one end. Then the whistle of the chain through the air and the *whup-crunch* when it hit. When she finished, she took a shower with her clothes on and left. Picked up the bag in the kitchen and stepped over the body on the floor. Blood flecks all over the wall.

•

"Wire's rolling," the Sysop said. "Let's take it from the top."

Jacky remembered and it trickled down the wire in her head into the recording studio. Remembered the back of a bar trying to pawn the gun and the badge. Rod Stewart playing over the noise of pool balls smacking together. No takers until one guy wearing a faded desert camo jacket; the patch over the pocket read *W. Pennfield*—jump to—fucking with Wayne on his couch in the afternoons, the real work didn't start until dark anyway, the garage downstairs quiet. Wayne's practised hands. Teaching her how to jimmy the door with a coat hanger and lie to the security company over the phone to get alarm codes. How-to of auto-theft. Through deserted lots at night, stealing new cars or new radios out of old cars.

"Let's settle down and get into the scene," the Sysop's voice.

Here we go, Jacky thought.

Dionne gives her a big hug, heavy scent of jasmine oil behind her long earrings. "Haven't seen you in so long," Dionne says. A big smile, "You eating here? Can you join us?"

"Sure," Jacky holds her arm; muscles under the dark chestnut skin. "This is my boyfriend, Wayne. Wayne, this is Dionne, an old friend from school. Has to be a year and a half since I've seen her."

"Hi," Wayne extends a handshake.

Squall of wooden chair legs on the floor while they sit.

Jacky knows DeGaul's edit style and fades out of the scene before they tell her to. Comes back in the restaurant washroom.

"What you really doing these days?" Dionne asks.

Jacky smiles with half her mouth. "Autos mostly. Wayne's got a garage, even a couple of regulars working for him. Sell the parts." She nods her chin, " 'Bout yourself?"

"Bicycle courier." Dionne's turn to smile. "Looks legit but mostly running shit between—"

"I can't remember his name," Jacky interrupts herself.

"Skip it," the Sysop says.

"—between [blank] and his posse. Jamaicans mostly."

"Just like old times." Jacky runs some more water, looks in the mirror and shivers. Goddamn air-conditioner.

"No more five and dime, though," Dionne throws paper into the garbage.

•

"DeGaul says production's behind schedule," the Sysop said. "That's why."

Jacky's too tired. Felt the prod go into the base of her skull. Everything's fuzzy around the edges, definition's never good when she's this tired. Test patterns flick through her head. Images burned behind her eyes like an old television set holding a ghost picture after it's turned off. A headache. Why not Dionne or Strat that got caught? Why her? But Jacky had a way out, was doing it that moment.

"We go over the death scene in the car today," again the Sysop's voice.

"No," Jacky said.

The Sysop sounds bored. "That's what's scheduled."

"It's my life, asshole." Jacky doesn't have the voice to yell, "And I'm too tired to do that today. We do something else."

A pause. "All right," he says, "how about the rescue?"

Jacky slides into the scene—

—into her sister, Ella, licking the hot fudge off her spoon. Brushes the bangs from her eyes and lifts another spoonful of her sundae. Her friends Helen and Jamina stuck in the booth next to her are more polite. Teenage girls trying too hard to be pretty. Heavy make-up and lots of gold jewelry that's fake. Outside the plate glass window that's most of the wall is the rain-slick parking lot. None of the wet leaf smell makes its way inside, just coffee. The only other people inside: the woman behind the counter, a sunburned drunk in a wool coat and hat and the knot of drag queens that'd catcalled Straton outside.

"How're the foster parents?" Jacky asks.

Ella pauses to swallow. "Kurt and Amy aren't so bad. Heavy Christian though." Spoons another mouthful, dances it on her tongue. "Don't want me to see any boys until I'm married. They'll shit a house if they find out I'm here."

Dionne lights a cigarette, leans back on the rain-specked window. The scene went on hold like that a long time. Jacky trying to remember exactly how it all happened. What details came first.

"Should I pause it?" the Sysop asked.

In answer, Jacky started up again.

The drag queens' argument breaks out loud and one shouts, "I'm not gonna go back short cause of him!" Straton is back, the mens' room door squeals shut on its air hinge. He slides into the bench beside Jacky,

sweat shirt tied around his waist. Sun-tanned chest showing through his mesh T-shirt. The queens glare at him.

"Maybe it's time to go," Helen suggests. "It's late."

Straton pushes a .32 cal automatic to Jacky, handle first, "Hundred and fifty," he says.

"Only?" Dionne asks. "What's wrong with it?"

He smiles his pretty-boy smile. "Hundred and fifty for a pretty girl like you."

Outside, the rain is a tiny mist. Long white reflections of lamp post light on the wet street. A car goes by, tires making a *whhush* noise against the water. Jacky hooks an elbow on the open, driver-side door. Ella and her friends giggling in the back seat. Jacky's eyes switch from the drag queens inside to Dionne and Straton, talking under the Dairy Queen awning. She can only make out that Dionne is asking questions. Straton keeps shaking his head, *no, no*. Until finally Dionne asks:

"You interested in moving east for work?" and Straton just shrugs.

The drag queens burst out of the door, push Straton away. "Listen cocksucker," the tallest hits him in the chest, "stick to sucking off suits after work, some people have a clientele in this hood."

"Fuck you." Straton shoves back.

Two clicks, two switches in the queen's hands. One slashes at Strat's chest and draws blood. "I'll kill you, bitch," he shouts, and there's silence.

Jacky has the .357 in her hand and fires into the crowd. The recoil jams up her arm and staggers her back, ears popping. She's surprised when one of the queens folds like he's

been punched by the invisible man. Then he goes down. Fear makes a grimace of her face. Nothing on her seems to work, she's just standing. Dionne screams at her, sitting in the car. Strat stands next to her with a hand pressed over the bloody seam across his shoulder. The next gunshot hits the car hood. Jacky stares. Lifts her gun. One of the queens is shooting back, the bullet hisses above her head.

She squeezes the trigger again, hears another gun go off beside her and jumps. Strat has the .32 pistol in hand. The queens are backing off at a run, dragging one of their number. The one with the pistol holds his ground. Fires again. Flash-crack of gunshots going both ways across the lot. Another hits the car. Dionne and the girls crouch down. Pressed to the dirty carpet on the floorboard.

The last queen turns and runs and it's quiet. A piece of plate glass falls out of the ice cream shop's window and splashes into a thousand slivers on the cement. *I must have shot it*, Jacky thinks. They get in the car and Jacky drives; tires squeal on wet pavement.

"Holy shit!" Ella leans over the front seat, "That was fucking cold! Holy shit, that was incredible!"

Jacky didn't know why she took Ella with her, but she did. There was no way Jacky was going to leave Ella there.

Wayne had been pissed. Jacky didn't even get a chance to explain when she got home that night; the shooting incident involving two separate youth gangs was blurred all over the eleven o'clock newscast. One

slain, at least three others wounded; a thirty second spot sandwiched between the reports of a garbage worker's picket line that turned to riot scene and an independent study showing a steady three percent annual increase in fetal defects in a sixty kilometre area around the Pickering Nuclear Generator.

He'd been angry enough to hit her after she stared down five minutes of drunken ranting. Pauley, one of the mechanics and a drinking buddy, pulled him away and Wayne punched a fist through the plate glass of the gun cabinet; the one that held the 9mm Beretta and Ithaca shotgun and the AK-47 he'd brought back from an Iraqi roadwreck on some Kuwait highway. Dionne held on to Ella near the door while Jacky bandaged his hand.

"How could you be so stupid?" Wayne asked, let her put iodine in the cuts. "What if they got the plates?"

"So what? Car's stolen," she shrugged.

"Think they won't trace that stolen car back to this city?" He shook his head. "Shit, Jacky. Shit! We're fucked now, you know that? If those two kids talk they'll know exactly who you are. Do you think her parents are just gonna shrug when she doesn't show up?"

"She's my sister." She jabbed the swab into his hand harder than she needed. "And she says her friends'll keep quiet."

"Christ! You trust a couple fifteen-year-olds? Shit, watch it." He pulled his arm away.

It began to sink in that he might be telling the truth. For the next twenty minutes she broke into a sweat, every moment expecting the

cops to blow the door and charge in.

"What do we do then?" she said quietly. "Give up?"

Wayne shook his head, tired.

Pauley snapped open another can of Labatts. "Fuck, why dontcha fucking lie low fer a while. Fucking cops'll only be on the fucking lookout for you until somethin' better comes along. Fuck off to the States for a while." He swigged from the can.

"Maybe." Wayne nodded. "Maybe not a bad idea."

"And live on what?" Jacky snorted. "We go to the states, I take everybody, Ella, Dionne, Strat, everybody; if the cops catch one of us they get us all. Where do you think we'll get that kind of money?"

The commercials ended and the next news report came on; Metro's third bank robbery this month has left sixteen wounded in an east end shootout. The criminals managed to get away with over forty-six thousand dollars in the heist. No word yet from the police department on nabbing the suspects.

•

It had surprised Jacky to see DeGaul in person. In the flesh he had the nouveau pasty-skinned look of Coco Chanel sunblock; the rich could afford to provide what the ozone could not. Boyish twists of rumpled hair fell over the lenses of thick mirrored shades. Around the edges she caught his eyes, covered in bluer than blue tinted contacts.

"Hiya sweetmeat," he beamed a big ceramic smile. "I was down for the count at the labs and they tell me we're coming up null on the Big Finish. What troubles Starface? We give

the best of care at Wired World don't we? The best techs, the best in pharmacists for your three squares a day."

DeGaul didn't know what to do with his hands. Kept rubbing and pointing, scratched the side of his head and looked in the pockets of his Armani imitation of a Harley Davidson leather jacket. Found a bottle of pills and shook one out. Swallowed it dry.

"Screw off, fuckwipe." Jacky turned her chair away.

"C'mon, Jack-o-lantern." DeGaul walked in front of her, smile even wider. "What gives?"

Jacky kept silent a moment. Closed her eyes to get away from him. "I need a vacation. I want some time off."

"No can do," DeGaul beamed. "Got schedules, got promotions in the works, got a deadline from the network heads. You gotta meet with the alligators by Saturday; Wired World picks up your legal retainer, if you stick to contract. Check me?"

"Yeah," Jacky sighed. "Check."

"Then let's go on for the big finish, right?"

Jacky thought. She knew DeGaul was on the edge; best and brightest. Knew he went all the way and had a voluntary meathook surgery. A match up to that little wire buried in the back of Jacky's brain. A wire that pumped her memories into vid and he edited for public consumption. He made cold millions raping her up the ass over and over again.

"You want the Big Finish, DeGaul?" she leered. "Climb aboard and I'll take you on the ride right now. How long's it been since you had a mindfuck like one I can make?"

"You mean it?" His smile faltered.

"Let's get fucked, cowboy," she winked.

DeGaul's molars showed, his porcelain smile so wide. "You ready sparks?" He didn't turn to ask the sysop.

"Right chief," the voice from the booth replied. "You sure you want to ride it without putting the raw cut through the sander?"

"Get ready to roll wire." DeGaul pulled up a chair opposite Jacky, put a Y socket in her output cable and ran one wire to the computer, the other to the plug at the base of his neck.

Now, Jacky thought, *now, you asshole, before you come down off that high and get wise. Roll the fucking tape and take what it was really like, for once.*

"Right chief," the sysop's voice, "rolling now."

Jacky began to remember that hot summer day with a vengeance

■

Calm, she thinks, be calm, even with her heart pushing out of her chest, fingers gone shaky on the heavy metallic thing in her jacket. Her mind balks at what she's doing but her feet keep walking forward. Jacky likes the feeling of being carried. Pumped full of menace, she shivers at the cleat of the other car doors closing and the footsteps of the four following behind her. Late day crowding of the sidewalk, bright sun reflected off the silvered glass walls of the bank building; silvered funhouse reflection of a girl in black coat and round sunglasses. Three men and a black woman framed behind her. She shivers and chokes on tears that explode from behind her eyes. Walking into herself,

into that person in the mirror that wears her body, speaks her voice, walks her walk.

•

Jacky felt when DeGaul slid in behind her, riding in that human high of her fear and adrenaline. Rocketed even on the memory of it.

•

The door opens and the mirror Jacky swings away. She lifts one foot over the threshold and settles her hand on the heavy thing in her pocket. For a moment the last step holds in mid-air, then she's through a wall of air conditioned cold air and towards the tellers. Behind her the steps of Dionne and Jacky takes a side glance to see Pauley go at the security guard, shotgun already half out of the fishing rod case.

At the tellers she pushes someone aside and crowds the front of the line, the cold thing from her pocket out and in the face of the teller. She clicks the hammer and points six .357 bullets.

"I want—" she says, and then the gunshot startles her out of her skin. From the sound she feels it go off right behind her head, and she squeezes the trigger into the face of the woman across the teller window.

The woman's teeth force their way out the back of her head around the force of the magnum slug and a second shot explodes behind Jacky.

In realtime, Jacky felt DeGaul flinch. Heard his teeth snap shut and chatter.

No time to watch the body fall, she puts her back to the counter, watches the barrel of her pistol track over fearcringed clients. Pauley staggering with a red stain pouring out the hole where his kidneys were. Another

shot takes him near the neck, makes him take one big step and the shotgun fires into another bystander before he drops on his face. Jacky traces the line of fire to a security guard with pistol out not ten feet from her. By Pauley's body the first guard climbs to one knee with gun out. Jacky's revolver wavers from one then back to the first as both take aim on her. Knows she can't hit both even if she was a good shot, but chooses the closest and levels the gun.

Wayne's first rounds hit barely a few feet from her, *spunk, spunk, spunk*, before Jacky can shoot. Bullets travel across the thin office wall behind then climb over the guard. Unzip him from armpit to armpit. Jacky felt more than saw the bullets blow through the divider wall behind the guard and into more people in the office beyond. The guard's chin bounces off his chest, and his insides boil out of his chest along the line of Wayne's bullets. He's down before Jacky can fire and she turns back to the other guard in time to see him shoot at her. No fear. Cold fever across her brow and she empties the rest of her gun at him as he shoots. In all the noise no shots hit true. She sees Strat straightarm Wayne's borrowed 9mm Beretta and shoot once to the back of the guard's head and he unravels like a ball of red strings all over the marble tile of the floor.

"Number Five," Wayne yells, "watch the door." And Strat steps over the body to look out the door.

"On the floor! On the floor, on the floor!" Dionne is beside Jacky, shouting at the clients and tellers, then jumps onto the counter and over.

"Number One," Wayne bawls at

Jacky, "reload, get the money!"

Jacky shakes out the empty shells from the gun and rolls over the counter, slides and lands in a huge pool of blood from the dead teller. A scream gets out of her mouth and she tries to get to her feet but the rubber soles of her boots slide on the slick floor. On hands and knees she slides to the nearest desk and pulls herself up. Smears handprints over the file papers and veneer wood finish.

Dionne stares at her with a pistol in each hand covering the employees behind the counter; one is from the dead guard.

"Christ, get up, One," she hisses.

Jacky stumbles into the open vault door, slips a plastic charger of six bullets into the pistol and snaps it shut. Two bags stapled inside her coat are pulled free and she sweeps money off the shelves into each. Large bundles of rough bills; unmarked, used bills without easily traceable serial numbers. Wayne's voice is a constant rant at the hostages.

"Getyer heads down motherfuckers, nobody moves. You want your ass shot out your mouth pal? Geddown! You cocksuckers stay the hell down over there or I'll shove this down your throat!"

Jacky stumbles out of the vault with the bags hitting her legs and sees the red prints of her bootsoles in the carpet. She coughs and is surprised when her mouth fills with burning puke. She tries to swallow but spits it out, and more follows.

"Shit," Dionne has her arm and takes one of the bags, leads her around the tellers' counter. "Ready to move, number Four," she says to Wayne. He nods, the AK-47 easy in

his hands.

"Number Five, check the car," he says, backs to Pauley's body and crouches down.

"All clear, Four," Strat yells.

Wayne rolls Pauley over, feels his neck then picks up the shotgun. "Go," he says.

•

On the street, Strat takes the lead to the car, gun held by his leg. Jacky stumbles next to Dionne and spots Ella waiting in the front seat of the car. Then she knows she's done wrong. Knows she never should have brought her. Wayne shoves her from behind with a gun in each hand.

There is no warning call. Strat jumps in the air and hangs a moment like a magician's levitation trick. A plate-sized hole sprouts from his chest and he falls all over the sidewalk before the gunshot sounds. Pistol shots and another shotgun blast come from the two cops behind an unmarked car across the street. Wayne pushes both the women down in front of a parked car and everywhere bystanders are running, their voices one long scream. Wayne pops up and fires back with the automatic rifle. Shatters the cop car window and sends the cops to the ground. In a moment they fire back again and Dionne leans around their cover to pop a few shots back.

"Fucking shit." Wayne snaps a fresh clip in the rifle, face a drawn mask. "Fucking shit," he says when he fires back.

Jacky leans over the hood of the car and joins him, fires two shots and sees their car pull away from the curb. Her gun clunks where it drops on the hood and her mouth opens to scream. Ella at the wheel pulls the car between

them and the police. Then the inside of the windshield splashes with blood and the car plows over the curb and into the storefront next to the bank. Jacky has time to finish her scream, then her voice is drowned out by the fireball of the unmarked cop car. Wayne is laughing, choking on tears at the same time and runs for the crashed getaway car.

Jacky is at the door of the car before him. The driver side window spiderweb shattered around one bullet hole. Somewhere nearby she hears a siren. Many sirens. Jacky drops gun and moneybag and pulls open the door. Everything inside the front seat of the car is marked with splatters of blood like a kid had been on a finger painting spree. Jacky whimpers and pulls her sister out of the seat, sinks to the pavement and cradles her misshapen head in her arms.

Jacky heard the mallet sounds of DeGaul's heels stutter against the base of his chair. Rattle of pill case gripped in his fist while he shook. Saltwater blurred her vision but she made the outline of the sysop yanking the feed line from the back of the director's head. White form of the medtech with a glittering needle in hand. DeGaul let out baby noises and the realtime smell of urine and puke came to Jacky.

"Get the hell out!" Wayne screams, "the car's a wreck!" And he grabs the moneybag and runs.

"Jacky," Dionne begs, dancing away from the car with the other sack of money, "Jacky c'mon!"

She bends over Ella's body and lets out a wail, begins to shake until she can't control her body. When she looks up again, Dionne is gone.

The police find her that way when they club her in the head and step her face to the ground when they put the cuffs on.

■

A week after Jacky recorded the final scene to her life story on wire tape and a month before her court date, her lawyer had a meet with her in the jail conference room. Jacky hollow faced and small in her chair, arms and legs slumped loosely even without the weighted cuffs on her wrists and ankles. Her lawyer smelled of Chanel perfume and skin stretched taut over her cheekbones from one too many plastic surgeries. Jacky signed the papers she produced from her briefcase with her cuffs scraping against the tabletop.

"That's it?" she asked.

"That's it for now." The lawyer stacked the papers neatly in her briefcase and stood up. "To be honest I think a murdering bitch like you should go straight to hell, but Wired World pays my retainer because I'm good. You won't get off free, you know that, but I can almost promise you'll be off in 10 to 14 instead of the chamber."

Jacky didn't move, didn't blink.

"With this wire deal you might be able to get a work parole soon." She snapped the briefcase shut. "WW might need the help, I hear Mr. DeGaul is taking an extended sick leave. And WW will always pay for the best in their field."

On her way back to her cell, Jacky tried the feel of a small smile. It felt good enough that she practised it in her mirror until she recognized the face that smiled back at her. •

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46, NOLAN MARY



THE PROGRESSIVE APPARATUS

by Hugh A.D. Spencer
illustrated by Ronn Sutton

IT stands at the foot of my bed, a flickering wave of purple light spreading out from its third eye. The glow wakes me and I make out its shape in the tinted dark—thin arms folded over a plastic chest.

The Apparatus is probing my mind.

I push my head into the pillow. "Go away...please," I moan. "I thought you weren't supposed to cause undue pain and harassment."

The Apparatus shakes its head, which causes the purple beam to flash crazily off the bedroom walls. It smiles grimly. "You were only half-asleep. And you were mentally composing a story."

I exhale in exasperation and pull myself into a sitting position. "It was nothing," I sigh, "just a few thoughts."

"The probe indicates a clear story premise," the Apparatus replies as it leans toward me. The purple ray assumes a deeper, more intense tone. "This will be much easier if you tell me voluntarily," it says.

I reach for the glass of water sitting on the bedside table. "Okay, okay." I sip the lukewarm fluid. "Harmless thing really...maybe there's some redeeming social value."

The Apparatus stands back and puts its hands at its sides. "That might represent progress," it says.

I hold my hand over my eyes to block the stabbing purple light: "A confidence trickster arrives at a village in medieval times. He endears himself to the foolish mayor and uses a miniature glass steam engine to mystify the citizenry...they come to believe that he is a wizard, and he starts to take many advantages..."

"Yes?" I detect a tone of measured disapproval in the Apparatus' voice.

I continue anyway: "...until a kindly grandmother and a hard-working plowboy see through the deception. So they persuade the villagers to overthrow the trickster's mental domination." I set aside the empty glass and look hopefully at the Apparatus. "I think it's quite a responsible theme, everyday people working together to free their minds..." My voice trails off.

"Let's just think about that." The ray flicks off and its glassy third eye recedes back into its forehead. After a moment, the Apparatus shakes its head. "The premise scores well on theme, and the female gender assignment to an assertive character is noted, but your traditional religious heritage makes your story unacceptable."

"Why?" It really is too bad that this isn't a dream, I think.

The figure at the foot of the bed explains: "The glass steam engine could be interpreted as a metaphor for e-meters, divining rods and crystals—devices used in new age therapies."

My eyes have adjusted to the darkness and I can see an expression of mild sympathy on the Apparatus' face.

"Considering your childhood training in conventional Christianity, this story could be viewed as a cloaked attack on minority religions."

"Shit!" I groan and fall back onto my pillow. "I was just playing with a few ideas."

There is an edge in the Apparatus' voice: "That is understood."

Then it leaves.

Eventually I fall asleep and the

Apparatus does not return that night. Apparently there were no more thoughts.

■

I'm at work at my computer. The Apparatus glides over to my side and looks at the glowing screen.

"Your tea's gone cold," it observes.

"Yes." I continue typing.

"Would you like another cup?"

Concern over my physical wellbeing, I muse. Typical.

"No, thanks. I ought to cut down on the caffeine."

I save the file and start up the printer. A tiny sail of paper unfolds to the sound of miniature metallic screams.

"How's the commercial going?" asks the Apparatus.

"You should know." I push my hands into my pockets and notice my reflection in the teacup; a white, stubble-smeared face in a stagnant gray pool.

The Apparatus scans the illuminated words on the screen. It laughs mildly. "Then one would venture that it was coming along fine."

"Safety belt public service messages are hard to screw up."

It looks thoughtful for a moment. "You'd be surprised," the Apparatus says finally. "But in your case it looks like a progressive example of the new male acting as the compassionate caregiver."

I massage my ashen face with both hands. I won't give the damn thing the satisfaction of seeing me cringe.

The Apparatus smiles and shrugs. "Or it could be interpreted as penitence for decades of reckless driving

by men." It turns on its heel and walks down the hall.

I tear a sheet of paper out of the printer and stare at my own words. I pick up a pencil and start making marks on the rough manuscript. I force myself to remain calm. I keep my face blank.

•

An Apparatus rarely explains itself. It took several months to work out the events which led to its arrival. My moment of judgment must have come in a writing seminar last spring.

Our assignment was to present an outline for a feature-length screenplay.

"This one is inspired by that psychology study, *When Prophecy Fails*," I said to my associates. "A small group of flying saucer cultists suddenly have a revelation that the world will soon be coming to an end. So they sell their homes, quit their jobs and wait for an alien spacecraft to pick them up before the planet explodes."

"I presume that the revelation is false?" asked another writer. "So your people are risking persecution and humiliation?"

I nodded my head.

Someone else looked in my direction: "The situation is a little vague, how are you going to drive the story?"

There's another voice: "Yeah, where's the dramatic tension?"

Feeling pretty clever, I answered: "I'm going to add an historical ticking clock. The cultists have their revelation during the Cuban Missile Crisis."

"So they think the end will be in a nuclear war?"

"Yes, as did a lot of other people at the time," I replied. "The sense of urgency will be heightened as they

watch the news coverage on TV."

There was a good nod factor around the table. Most of them saw where the story was going.

"Nice touch," the seminar leader said. "It structures the plot and gives your characters some credibility and sympathy."

"Who are the viewpoint characters?" somebody asked.

I flipped through the notes in front of me: "Two residents in a mid-west trailer park. One's a young housewife; the other is an older widow, who's also a practising mystic. They're examples of seekers, people looking for something more meaningful in otherwise empty lives..."

"What makes you think you're qualified?" It was a hard voice from the far end of the table. The reflection of the fluorescent lights on the speaker's glasses only partly obscured a stare of steady hate.

This was a surprise. "I beg your pardon?"

The voice of my critic stayed even, but unfortunately I now had a good look at the eyes: "You can't write female characters."

This was even more of a surprise. "How's that?"

"It just isn't possible. You'll contaminate them with male bias."

I briefly considered some kind of speech about freedom of expression and the responsibility of a writer to explore as many different viewpoints as possible. But then I looked into those glass-covered eyes and I changed my mind.

This may have been a fatal act of cowardice. "Let's just drop it, shall we?" I said.

The other speaker made a curt

note on a piece of paper and we moved on to the next presentation.

I turn the doorknob.

"Going out?" The Apparatus looks up from the television. Sometimes it likes to watch the afternoon reruns.

"Going to the mall...to photocopy the script." I hold up the file folder for the Apparatus to see. "The seat belt thing. Remember? The one you reviewed?"

The Apparatus returns its gaze to the giggling heads on the gray screen. Its feet sag into small puddles on the carpet; it is entering a state of relaxation.

"Hurry back," it says.
I open the door.

Sometime after the workshop incident the Apparatus arrived in the mail.

Not knowing what it was, I opened the big brown envelope and the Apparatus poured itself out. It unfolded on my living room wall like an early morning shadow. A letter was enclosed in the envelope:

For your convenience, the Apparatus can be thought of as living software in real time and space. It is animated, self-aware information; designed to guide your creative development into areas which compensate for the limitations of your particular cultural and genetic heritage.

The Apparatus pulled itself off the wall and billowed into a three dimensional figure. It stood before me. Twin obsidian spheres pushed themselves

outward and set themselves at the front of its newly formed face.

The Apparatus is a humane mechanism for protecting society against the perpetuation of stereotypes and unjust expressions.

A soft gash opened up. The Apparatus smiled.

"What an ass."

"What a great ass."

Two teenage women are looking at a movie poster outside the mall cinema. The poster captions say something about kick-boxing and "bazooka revenge" (whatever that is) and the main illustration highlights two near naked men locked in passionate combat. Their musculature is almost architectural in proportion.

I walk toward the printer's shop.

"What a tight ass..." I hear in the distance.

A friend of mine wrote those words and helped develop the promotional campaign. One day she invited me to one of those expensive Yorkville cafés. Public service copy doesn't pay much, so I accepted.

I had heard that she had been given an Apparatus and I wondered how she seemed to cope so well. Eventually I asked about the movie promotion:

"How did you get away with such shameless exploitation of the human body?"

Georgina smiled and shredded a piece of chicken with her fork. "My Apparatus suggested it; apparently my working on the promotion represented an important 'structural adjustment of values.' " She inspected the meat im-

paled on the end of her fork. "Also, the posters encourage women to view men as sexual objects, as men have seen women for centuries. This is supposed to represent greater personal freedom for women."

I gazed at my bowl of soup. It had gone cold. "I didn't know that our values were being adjusted with such precision," I said. "It just sounds like tit for tat to me."

Georgina laughed. "Or pecs for tits."

Her words made me shudder and I suddenly wondered if my Apparatus might have followed me to the restaurant. Sometimes they do that, if they think something might be up. "I'm glad you said that," I muttered. Could they hear us?

Georgina took a long drink of wine before she spoke: "I liked my original copy a lot better."

I pushed my spoon through the cloudy fluid in my soup bowl. "Can you talk about it?"

"Why not?" She laughed bitterly. "I wanted to feature the heroism of soldiers under fire. Self-sacrifice, initiative and patriotism in extreme conditions. I researched the hell out of it."

"They rejected that?" I struggled to keep my voice down. "But they love patriotism."

"My Apparatus said that the theme reinforced militaristic stereotypes."

A waiter led a group of shoppers to their table. I thought I saw a dark shape lurking by the door...

"Well, go figure," I said carefully.

My friend laughed again. There was a touch of craziness in her voice. "Yeah, they are subtle tools, aren't they? They move in very mysterious

ways."

I nodded my head. Sometimes it is good to look like you agree.

•

When I get back from the mall I hear the sound of paper tearing. I run to my study.

The Apparatus is sitting at my desk. It removes a page from the desk drawer, scans it and sets it aside. It picks up another page, looks at the text, and starts to tear the paper into thin strips. It is a slow and deliberate act.

"Don't, please!" I gasp.

"Be quiet," says the Apparatus. It methodically tears the paper strips into small white rectangles. "Your manuscript is irresponsible."

The page has been reduced to a fat wad of paper. The Apparatus pops the wad into its mouth. I watch in confusion as the damned thing chews up my work. I notice that it has grown teeth for this task. It swallows.

"This work will be destroyed for you." The Apparatus burps. A perverse affectation? I doubt that living software has trouble digesting.

"Why?" I ask.

The Apparatus holds out the next page of the manuscript. The page is covered with red markings: underlinings, crosses and spelling corrections.

"How?" replies the Apparatus. "How did you ever think you could get away with it?" It points to the red scratches on the page. "When you put each of the marked words in sequence, they form sentences."

My body sags against the doorframe. I feel nauseous and heavy, as if I were suddenly transformed into a sack of lead. "No," I protest feebly. "I'm just having a little trouble with

my new spell check program, so I have to..."

My alibi is cut short by the sound of crumpling paper. The Apparatus looks directly at me as it crams another fistful of words into its mouth.

"Okay," I confess. "It's a play."

"What's it about?" The Apparatus speaks with its mouth full.

"A group of teenage students discover that one of their teachers is conducting role-playing experiments on them during their classes."

There is a rippling on the Apparatus' forehead; the third eye is threatening to emerge. "Continue," it directs.

"The students are offended by the fact that the tests are conducted without their consent, so they conspire to spoil the results."

The Apparatus shakes its head as it starts to tear another page. "Even if you hadn't written this draft without authorization, the theme is a criminal attack on legitimate moral education and positive adult role models."

"Why is that?!" I wail. "Why can't it be a defence of the rights of children? Or an attack on experimen-

tation without consent?"

The tearing continues. "Perhaps if another sort of person had written this. But you are incapable of writing such stories."

I notice that I've sunk all the way to the floor. I'm bent over like I have no spine. What can I say to stop it?


"It was naive to even attempt this," proclaims the Apparatus. "Even if you were allowed to complete the work, no one would perform it, no one would publish it."

I study the cracks and stains on my hardwood floor.

The Apparatus keeps on reading, tearing and chewing. I have a sudden and perverse thought: I hope the damn thing is absolutely right. I hope that for every censored story somebody gets a job, and for every suppressed idea, some innocent person is freed from prison.

I could share this with the Apparatus, but I don't. Really I have nothing to say.

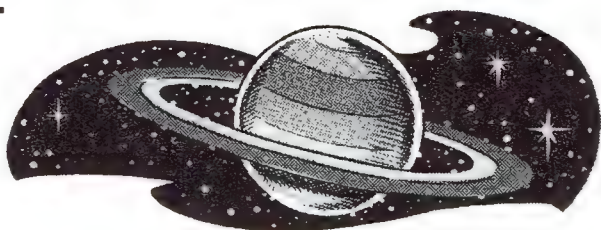
There is nothing to say. •



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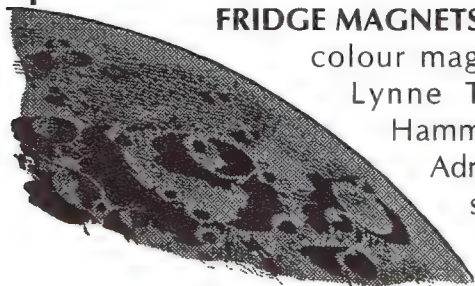
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A S K M R . S C I E N C E

MR. BD OF VANCOUVER, BC, ASKS:

Q : *Why is food irradiation not in use here?*

A : Irradiation with gamma rays produces free radicals in the irradiated food. For long-standing political reasons, North American societies will not allow radicals to remain free.

MS. JR OF YELLOWKNIFE, NWT, ASKS:

Q : *How can I restore my large collection of non-functional, but not empty, ballpoint pens to writing condition?*

A : In pens of this description the ink has been blocked by an air bubble—an embolism, if you will. Writing ability can be restored by the following method: Tie the pen by its back with a 20 cm cord to the remaining blade of an eggbeater from which one blade has been removed. Five minutes of whirling the pen with your home-made centrifuge should be about right.

MS. SF OF COQUITLAM, BC, ASKS:

Q : *Why do so many SF fans live on the upper floors of high-rise apartment buildings?*

A : For reasons as yet only poorly understood, many SF fans lead calorically challenged lifestyles. Many of these intelligent but rather large persons intuitively make use of the gravitational inverse square law by seeking to live at high altitudes, where they will weigh less. This tenent weight distribution, however, causes excessive elevator pulley wear and makes high-rise apartment buildings less stable in the event of an earthquake.



If you have a question concerning life or the true nature of the universe, please send it to Mr. Science c/o ON SPEC, Box 4727, Edmonton, AB T6E 5G6.

the inner mind...



ON CONS — Canadian Convention & Reading Calendar

When contacting conventions for more information, include a Self-Addressed Stamped Envelope for their reply. Abbreviation code: GoH = Guest of Honour, TM = Toastmaster, MC = Master of Ceremonies.

• MAY 13-15 – CANCON 94

Talisman Hotel, Ottawa. GoH: S.M. Stirling. Memb: \$25 to Mar 31 1994. Info: PO Box 5752, Merivale Depot, Nepean ON, K2C 3M1.

• MAY 21-22 KEYCLONE 94

Relaxacon, Hawaiian theme. Travellodge East, Winnipeg. GoH: Ben Bova, FanGoH: Dave Clement. Info: PO Box 3178, Winnipeg MB, R3C 4E6.

• MAY 26-30 – INT SPACE DEVELOPMENT CON

Professional. Regal Constellation Hotel, Toronto. Info: 1994 ISDC, 107 Evans Ave, Toronto ON, M6S 3V9.

• JUN 10-12 TERRACON 94

CANCELLED.

• JUL 22-24 CONVERSION 11

Marlborough Inn, Calgary. GoHs Fred Pohl, Marion Zimmer Bradley, Sean Russell. Memb: \$40. Info: Box 1088, Stn M, Calgary AB, T2P 2K9.

• SEPT 1-5 – CONADIAN (Worldcon)

Winnipeg Convention Centre, Winnipeg. GoH: Anne McCaffrey, Art GoH: George Barr, TM: Barry Longyear, FanGoH: Robert Runté. Memb: was \$125 to Dec 31, 1993. Info: PO Box 2430, Winnipeg MB, R3C 4A7.

READINGS:

HEATHER SPEARS will be reading:

- May 31 Harbourfront, Toronto
- June 15 South Coast Arts Council, Sooke, BC
- June 23 Vancouver Art Gallery
- July 14 McMullen Gallery, U of A Hospital, Edmonton
- Sept 1-5 Worldcon: Launch of *The Taming*, the third in the *Moonfall* trilogy

•

ON SPEC would like to print your Canadian convention and author readings information. Send us details of your event at least 5 months in advance (to Box 4727, Edmonton AB, T6E 5G6), and we'll run it free of charge.

The bulk of the information in this column is courtesy of ConTRACT, the Canadian convention newsletter, available from 321 Portage Ave, Winnipeg MB, R3B 2B9 (subscriptions \$7 / 6 issues). Send your convention info directly to them, as well.

ON OUR CONTRIBUTORS

ABOUT OUR AUTHORS

AL BETZ (*Ask Mr. Science*) is the social secretary for Mr. Science.

BONNIE BLAKE (*Mamasan*) Since Bonnie rediscovered writing in 1989, she has published two stories in *The Wolf's Eye* and poetry in *Tickled by Thunder* and *Tabula Rasa*. She has also published several nonfiction pieces and has written a weekly humour column for *The Chronicle-Journal* since July, 1990.

BRIAN BURKE (*Love in the Atomic Age*) holds degrees in Creative Writing from York University and the University of British Columbia (MFA), and has taught English Lit. and Creative Writing at various universities in Canada. New work is due in *The New Quarterly*, *Carleton Arts Review*, *The Plaza* (Japan) and *Writ*.

HAROLD CÔTÉ (*The Project*) is from Montréal, Québec. In 1990, he won the *Prix Solaris* for his short story, "Sens dessus dessous."

CATHERINE GIRCZYK (*Fata Morgana*) co-wrote with Tom Crichton the 1993 Edmonton Fringe hit *Dead Slow*. She recently moved to Vancouver, where she is writing book reviews.

WESLEY HERBERT (*Director's Cut*) quotes Kathy Hacker: "Don't get into the writer's personal life thinking if you like the books you'll like the writer. A writer's personal life is horrible and lonely. Writers are queer so keep away from them. I live in pain, but one day, one day I'm going to be happy I'm going to be so happy even if I'm not alive any more."

JOCKO (*The Stickman Trial*) has recently appeared in *The Antigonish Review* and *Vintage '92*. He would like to be on the first manned mission to Mars if it will exempt him from all earthly taxes for a few years.

KARIN LOWACHEE (*Culture Shock*) has not been the same since she saw *Star Wars* at the age of four. Now, many moons later, she spends the better part of the week battling through wind tunnels at York University. When she isn't reading, writing essays, or just plain writing, Karin enjoys baseball (Go Jays!), hockey (Go Leafs!), Japanimation and Shakespeare, not necessarily in that order.

KATE RIEDEL (*Therapy*) is an amateur botanist specializing in urban wild plants who lives in Mississauga, Ontario. She was one of Karl Schroeder's first students in the Science Fiction/Fantasy Writing class he teaches at George Brown college.

HUGH A.D. SPENCER (*The Progressive Apparatus*) of Toronto is acting as co-curator for an upcoming exhibition on Canadian Science Fiction for the National Library.

PETER WATTS (*Nimbus*) Sealions in the Bering Sea are dropping like flies. Peter Watts makes a marginal living trying to figure out why. He is unnaturally fond of the music of Jethro Tull, and once removed a cyst from his own scrotum using only rubbing alcohol and a disposable razor blade. (*Thank you for sharing that with us, Peter. J.S.*)

ABOUT OUR ARTISTS

JEAN-PIERRE NORMAND (COVER) lives in Montréal, Québec, and works as a freelance illustrator. He has always been interested in SF and has done magazine and book covers. He shows his work regularly at conventions in Canada and the U.S. where he has won numerous prizes.

ROBERT BOERBOOM (*Director's Cut*) hangs his hat, brushes and pencils in Brantford, Ontario. He keeps himself busy with freelance illustration and by painting billboards.

TIM HAMMELL (*The Project* and *The Inner Mind*) of Calgary, Alberta, is currently doing egg concepts of preproduction poster art for a film called *Black Easter* being shot near New York. He was appointed Canadian correspondent for *Femme Fatales* magazine.

ADRIAN KLEINBERGEN (*Culture Shock*) is a freelance artist from Calgary, Alberta. He is a frequent contributor to *ON SPEC*.

NANCY NILES (*Mamasan*) is a freelance illustrator who lives in Calgary, Alberta. She is a frequent contributor to *ON SPEC*.

KENNETH SCOTT (*Therapy*) would like to give thanks to EVENTHIA—even this marginal success he owes to her. Sniff...sniff...

MITCHELL STUART (*Nimbus*) of Sherwood Park, Alberta, has many areas of artistic interest including illustration, design, advertising, fine art, sculpture and music. His vehicle is his company PANGAEA Illustration and Design.

RONN SUTTON (*The Progressive Apparatus*) of Ottawa, Ontario, has had illustrations in various publications such as the *Toronto Star*, *Macleans*, and *Canadian Business*. He has drawn and written *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.*, *Cases of Sherlock Holmes*, and *Starbikers* comics. He worked in animation on *Batman: The Animated Series* and the feature film *We're Back: A Dinosaur's Tale*.

GENERAL INFORMATION

ON SPEC is seeking original science fiction, fantasy, horror, ghost or fairy stories, magic realism, etc. Strong preference is given to submissions by Canadians. Send your short stories (max. 6000 words), short short stories (under 1000 words) or poetry (max. 100 lines) to the *ON SPEC* address below.

All submissions **must** include a Self Addressed Stamped Envelope (SASE) with sufficient return postage. **Do NOT send originals.**

Submissions must be in **competition format** (author's name should NOT appear on manuscript). Enclose separate cover page with your name, address, **phone number**, story title and word count.

Please send SASE for complete guidelines before submitting.

Deadlines are May 31/94 (for Winter/94), August 31/94 (Theme: "HORROR & DARK FANTASY," for Spring/95), November 30/94 (for Summer/95), and Feb. 28/95 (for Fall/95).

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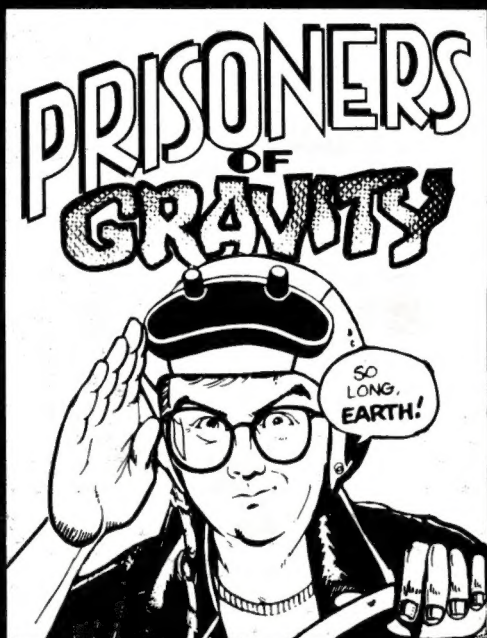
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